

STAR
WARS™



**Junior Jedi Knights
Omnibus**

**Nancy Richardson
Rebecca Moesta**



Star Wars: Junior Jedi Knights is a work of fiction. Names, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

Copyright © 2021 by Lucasfilm Ltd. & ® or ™ where indicated.

All Rights Reserved. Used Under Authorization.

Published in the United States by JAM, an imprint of Berkley Books, a division of Penguin Books, Inc., New York.

JAM is a registered trademark and the JAM colophon is a trademark of Penguin Books, Inc.

This book contains the following stories which were published separately from 1995–1997, and are copyright © by Lucasfilm Ltd. & ® or ™ where indicated:

Star Wars: The Golden Globe

Star Wars: Lyric's World

Star Wars: Promises

Star Wars: Anakin's Quest

Star Wars: Vader's Fortress

Star Wars: Kenobi's Blade

www.starwars.com

******Fan Printing - Not Officially Published******

This book is not to be sold or distributed!

Includes

The Golden Globe

Lyric's World

Promises

Anakin's Quest

Vader's Fortress

Kenobi's Blade

STAR WARS Timeline



DAWN OF THE JEDI 25,793 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

25,793 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope
Dawn of the Jedi
Dawn of the Jedi
Volume One: Force Storm
Volume Two: Prisoner of Bogan
Volume Three: Force War



THE OLD REPUBLIC 5,000-1,000 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

5,000 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope
Tales of the Jedi
The Golden Age of the Sith
The Fall of the Sith Empire
Crosscurrent

4,000 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope
Tales of the Jedi
Knights of the Old Republic
The Freedon Nadd Uprising
Dark Lords of the Sith
The Sith War
Redemption

3,964 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope
Knights of the Old Republic
Volume One: Commencement
Volume Two: Flashpoint
Volume Three: Days of Fear, Nights of Anger
Volume Four: Daze of Hate, Knights of Suffering
Volume Five: Vector
Volume Six: Vindication
Volume Seven: Dueling Ambitions
Volume Eight: Destroyer
Volume Nine: Demon
War

3,956 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope
KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC
The Old Republic
Revan

3,951 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope
KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC II: THE SITH LORDS

3,678 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope
The Old Republic
Volume Two: Blood of the Empire

3,653 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope
The Old Republic
Deceived
Volume One: The Threat of Peace

3,645 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope
Red Harvest
The Old Republic
Fatal Alliance
Volume Three: The Lost Suns
Annihilation

THE OLD REPUBLIC

3,638 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope
THE OLD REPUBLIC: SHADOW OF REVAN

THE OLD REPUBLIC: KNIGHTS OF THE FALLEN EMPIRE

3,630 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope
THE OLD REPUBLIC: KNIGHTS OF THE ETERNAL THRONE

2,974 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope
Lost Tribe of the Sith
Spiral

1,032 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope
Knight Errant
Volume One: Aflame
Knight Errant
Volume Two: Deluge
Volume Three: Escape

1,000 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope
Darth Bane
Path of Destruction
Jedi vs. Sith
Darth Bane
Rule of Two
Dynasty of Evil



RISE OF THE SITH 1,000-22 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

67 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope
Darth Plagueis

53 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope
Jedi - The Dark Side

44 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope
Jedi Apprentice
The Rising Force
The Dark Rival
The Hidden Past
The Mark of the Crown
The Defenders of the Dead
The Uncertain Path
The Captive Temple
The Day of Reckoning
The Fight for Truth
The Shattered Peace
Special Edition: Deceptions

43 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope
Jedi Apprentice
The Deadly Hunter
The Evil Experiment
The Dangerous Rescue

41 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope
Jedi Apprentice
The Ties that Bind
The Death of Hope
The Call to Vengeance
The Only Witness
The Threat Within

38 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope
Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan
The Aurorient Express
The Last Stand on Ord Mantell

33 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope
Jedi Council - Acts of War
Maul: Lockdown

32 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope
Republic
Volume One: Prelude to Rebellion
Darth Maul
Episode I Adventures
Search for the Lost Jedi
The Bartokk Assassins
The Fury of Darth Maul
Jedi Emergency
The Ghostling Children
The Hunt for Anakin Skywalker
Capture Arawynne
Trouble on Tatooine
Rescue in the Core
Festival of Warriors
Pirates from Beyond the Sea
The Bongo Rally
Cloak of Deception
Darth Maul: Shadow Hunter

EPISODE I: THE PHANTOM MENACE

BOUNTY HUNTER

Jango Fett - Open Seasons
Republic
Volume Two: Outlander
Volume Three: Emissaries to Malastare
Volume Four: Twilight
Infinity's End

30 *YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope*
Republic
Volume Five: The Hunt for Aurra Sing
Volume Six: Darkness
Volume Seven: The Stark Hyperspace War
Volume Eight: Rite of Passage

29 *YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope*
Rogue Planet

28 *YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope*
Jedi Quest
Path to Truth
Jedi Quest

27 *YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope*
Outbound Flight
Jedi Quest
The Way of the Apprentice
The Trail of the Jedi
The Dangerous Games

25 *YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope*
Jedi Quest
The Master of Disguise
The School of Fear
The Shadow Trap
The Moment of Truth

24 *YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope*
Jedi Quest
The Changing of the Guard
The False Peace
Starfighter: Crossbones
Republic
Volume Nine: Honor and Duty

23 *YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope*
Jedi Quest
The Final Showdown
Star Wars Adventures
Hunt the Sun Runner
The Cavern of Screaming Skulls
The Hostage Princess
Jango Fett vs. the Razor Eaters
The Shape-Shifter Strikes
The Warlords of Balmorra

22 *YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope*
JEDI STARFIGHTER

The Approaching Storm
Blood Ties: A Tale of Jango & Boba Fett

EPISODE II: ATTACK OF THE CLONES

REPUBLIC COMMANDO

THE CLONE WARS
(VIDEO GAME)

Boba Fett
The Fight to Survive
Crossfire

Clone Wars
Volume One: The Defense of Kamino

Boba Fett
Maze of Deception
Hunted

Clone Wars
Volume Two: Victories and Sacrifices
Republic Commando
Hard Contact

CLONE WARS:
VOLUME ONE

SkyeWalkers

Clone Wars
Volume Four: Light and Dark
The Cestus Deception
Jedi Trial

Clone Wars
Volume Three: Last Stand on Jabim
Volume Five: The Best Blades
Volume Six: On the Fields of Battle

THE CLONE WARS:
THE MOVIE

THE CLONE WARS:
SEASON ONE

The Clone Wars: Secret Missions
Breakout Squad
Curse of the Black Hole Pirates
Duel at Shattered Rock
Guardians of the Chiss Key

The Clone Wars
Volume One: Shipyards of Doom
Wild Space
No Prisoners
Volume Two: Crash Course

THE CLONE WARS:
REPUBLIC HEROES

The Clone Wars
The Colossus of Destiny
Hero of the Confederacy

Shatterpoint
Republic Commando
Triple Zero

21 *YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope*
THE CLONE WARS:
SEASON TWO

The Clone Wars Gambit
Stealth
Siege

The Clone Wars
The Wind Raiders of Talorann
Republic Commando
True Colors

Medstar
Battle Surgeons
Jedi Healer

THE CLONE WARS:
SEASON THREE

The Clone Wars
Deadly Hands of Shon-Ju
Strange Allies
The Starcrusher Trap

THE CLONE WARS:
SEASON FOUR

The Clone Wars
The Smuggler's Code
The Sith Hunters
Defenders of the Lost Temple

THE CLONE WARS:
SEASON FIVE

20 *YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope*
General Grievous

THE CLONE WARS:
SEASON SIX

Clone Wars
Volume Eight: The Last Siege, the Final Truth
Volume Seven: When They Were Brothers

Boba Fett
A New Threat
Pursuit

19 *YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope*
Yoda: Dark Rendezvous

CLONE WARS:
VOLUME TWO

Labyrinth of Evil

EPISODE III: REVENGE OF THE SITH

Republic Commando
Order 66

Republic
Volume Nine: Endgame

Kenobi

Purge

Dark Lord: The Rise of Darth Vader

Dark Times

Volume One: The Path to Nowhere

Darth Vader

Darth Vader & The Lost Command

Imperial Commando: 501st

Dark Times

Volume Two: Parallels

Volume Three: Vector

Coruscant Nights

Jedi Twilight

Darth Vader

Darth Vader & The Ghost Prison

Dark Times

Volume Four: Blue Harvest

Volume Five: Out of the Wilderness

Volume Six: Fire Carrier

Volume Seven: A Spark Remains

18 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Darth Vader

Darth Vader & The Ninth Assassin

Last of the Jedi

The Desperate Mission

Dark Warning

Underworld

Death on Naboo

A Tangled Web

Return of the Dark Side

Secret Weapon

Against the Empire

Master of Deception

Reckoning

Coruscant Nights

Streets of Shadow

Patterns of Force

The Last Jedi

17 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Darth Vader

Darth Vader & Cry of Shadows

15 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

DROIDS

10 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Droids (Marvel)

The Han Solo Trilogy

The Paradise Snare

5 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Droids (Dark Horse)

Volume One: The Kalarba Adventures

Volume Two: Rebellion

Volume Three: Season of Revolt

Jabba the Hutt

The Gaar Suppoon Hit

The Hunger of Princess Nampi

The Dynasty Trap

Betrayal

The Han Solo Trilogy

The Hutt Gambit

4 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

The Lando Calrissian Adventures

Lando Calrissian & the Mindharp of Sharu

3 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

The Lando Calrissian Adventures

Lando Calrissian & the Flamewind of Oseon

Boba Fett

Enemy of the Empire

The Lando Calrissian Adventures

Lando Calrissian & the Starcave of Thonboka

THE FORCE UNLEASHED

Death Star

Agent of the Empire

Volume One: Iron Eclipse

2 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Agent of the Empire

Volume Two: Hard Targets

The Han Solo Trilogy

Rebel Dawn

The Han Solo Adventures

Han Solo At Star's End

Han Solo's Revenge

Han Solo and the Lost Legacy

Adventures in Hyperspace

Fire Ring Race

Shinbone Showdown

1 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

THE FORCE UNLEASHED II

Star Wars Adventures

Han Solo & The Hollow Moon of Khorya

Dark Forces

Soldier for the Empire

Empire

Volume One: Betrayal

Death Troopers

Underworld - The Yavin Vassilika

Empire

Volume Two: Darklighter

EMPIRE AT WAR

X-WING

Blood Ties: Boba Fett is Dead

LETHAL ALLIANCE

DARK FORCES

Shadow Games

The Assassination of Darth Vader



THE REBELLION

0-4 YEARS AFTER

STAR WARS: A New Hope

**0 EPISODE IV:
A NEW HOPE**

**BATTLEFRONT: RENEGADE
SQUADRON**

REBEL ASSAULT

**ROGUE SQUADRON II:
ROGUE LEADER**

Tales from the Mos Eisley Cantina

Empire

Volume Three: The Imperial Perspective

**ROGUE SQUADRON III:
REBEL STRIKE**

Star Wars Missions

Assault on Yavin 4

Escape from Thyferra

Attack on Delrakkin

Destroy the Liquidator

Scoundrels

Pizzazz

The Keeper's World

The Kingdom of Ice

Star Wars Missions

Darth Vader's Return

Rogue Squadron to the Rescue

Bounty on Bonodan

Total Destruction

Rebel Force
Target
Hostage
Renegade
Firefight
Trapped

Allegiance

Rebel Force
Uprising

Empire
Volume Three: The Imperial Perspective

Classic Star Wars
Volume One: Doomworld
Volume Two: Dark Encounters

Science Adventures
Emergency in Escape Pod Four
Journey Across Planet X

Star Wars Missions
Revolt of the Battle Droids
Showdown in Mos Eisley
Bounty Hunters vs. Battle Droids
The Vactooine Disaster

Star Wars
Volume One: In the Shadow of Yavin
Volume Two: From the Ruins of Alderaan
Volume Three: Rebel Girl
Volume Four: A Shattered Hope

ROGUE SQUADRON

Galaxy of Fear
Eaten Alive
City of the Dead
Planet Plague

Empire
Volume Four: The Heart of the Rebellion
Volume Five: Allies and Adversaries
River of Chaos

Boba Fett
Man with a Mission

Galaxy of Fear
Ghost of the Jedi
Army of Terror

Empire
Volume Six: In the Shadows of their Fathers
Volume Seven: The Wrong Side of the War

Galaxy of Fear
The Brain Spiders
The Swarm

Choices of One

Rebellion
Volume One: My Brother, My Enemy
Volume Two: The Ahakista Gambit
Volume Three: Small Victories
Volume Four: Vector

Boba Fett
Overkill

Galaxy of Fear
Spore
The Doomsday Ship
Clones

Star Wars Adventures
Chewbacca & the Slavers of the Shadowlands

1 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Galaxy of Fear
The Hunger

THE STAR WARS HOLIDAY SPECIAL

Star Wars Missions
The Hunt for Han Solo
The Search for Grubba the Hutt
Ithorian Invasion
Togorian Trap

Empire and Rebellion
Honor Among Thieves

Galaxies: The Ruins of Dantooine

Star Wars Missions
Prisoner of the Nikto Pirates
The Monster of Dweem
Voyage to the Underworld
Imperial Jailbreak

2 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

STAR WARS: GALAXIES

TIE FIGHTER

Splinter of the Mind's Eye

Star Wars Adventures
Princess Leia and the Royal Ransom
Boba Fett and the Ship of Fear

Epic Collection
The Newspaper Strips Volume One
The Newspaper Strips Volume Two
Empire and Rebellion
Razor's Edge

3 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Rebel Heist

EPISODE V: THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK

X-WING ASSAULT

Tales of the Bounty Hunters

Star Wars Adventures
Luke Skywalker & the Treasure of the Dragonsnakes
The Will of Darth Vader

Classic Star Wars
Volume Three: Resurrection of Evil
Volume Three: Screams of the Void

X-WING VS. TIE FIGHTER

EWOKS SEASON ONE

EWOKS SEASON TWO

EWOKS: CARAVAN OF COURAGE

EWOKS: BATTLE FOR ENDOR

Classic Star Wars
Volume Five: A Fool's Bounty (#68-72)

SHADOWS OF THE EMPIRE

The Bounty Hunters: Scoundrel's Wages

Battle of the Bounty Hunters

Classic Star Wars
Volume Five: A Fool's Bounty (#73-81)

REBEL ASSAULT II: THE HIDDEN EMPIRE



THE NEW REPUBLIC 4-24 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

4 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Tales from Jabba's Palace

EPISODE VI: RETURN OF THE JEDI

Mara Jade: By the Emperor's Hand

The Bounty Hunter
The Mandalorian Armor
Slave Ship
Hard Merchandise

The Truce at Bakura

Classic Star Wars
Volume Six: Wookiee World
Volume Seven: Far, Far Away

Shadows of the Empire: Evolution

X-Wing: Rogue Leader

X-Wing: Rogue Squadron
Volume One: The Rebel Opposition
Volume Two: The Phantom Affair
Volume Three: Battleground: Tatooine
Volume Four: The Warrior Princess
Volume Five: Requiem for a Rogue
Volume Six: In the Empire's Service
Volume Seven: Blood and Honor
Volume Eight: Masquerade
Volume Nine: Mandatory Retirement

Jedi Prince
The Glove of Darth Vader
The Lost City of the Jedi
Zorba the Hutt's Revenge
Mission from Mount Yoda
Queen of the Empire
Prophets of the Dark Side

5 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Tales from the New Republic
Boba Fett
Twin Engines of Destruction
Luke Skywalker & the Shadows of Mindor
The Heart of the Jedi

JEDI KNIGHT: DARK FORCES II

Dark Forces
Rebel Agent
Jedi Knight

6 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

X-Wing
Rogue Squadron

7 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

X-Wing
Wedge's Gamble
The Kryptos Trap
The Bacta War
Wrath Squadron
Iron Fist
Solo Command

8 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

The Courtship of Princess Leia
Tatooine Ghost

9 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Thrawn Trilogy
Heir to the Empire
Dark Force Rising
The Last Command
X-Wing
Isard's Revenge

10 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

JEDI KNIGHT: MYSTERIES OF THE SITH

Dark Empire Trilogy
Dark Empire
Dark Empire II

Boba Fett
Bounty on Bar-Kooda
When the Fat Lady Swings
Murder Most Foul

11 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Dark Empire Trilogy
Empire's End
Boba Fett
Agent of Doom
Crimson Empire
Crimson Empire
The Bounty Hunters: Kenix Kil
Crimson Empire
Council of Blood
Jedi Academy
Jedi Search
Dark Apprentice
Champions of the Force
I, Jedi

12 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Children of the Jedi

JEDI KNIGHT II: JEDI OUTCAST

Darksaber

13 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

X-Wing
Starfighters of Adumar
Planet of Twilight

Jedi Academy
Leviathan
Crimson Empire
Empire Lost

14 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

The Crystal Star

JEDI KNIGHT: JEDI ACADEMY

16 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Black Fleet Crisis
Before the Storm
Shield of Lies
Tyrant's Nest

17 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

The New Rebellion

18 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Corellian Trilogy
Ambush at Corellia
Assault at Selonia
Showdown at Centerpoint

19 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Hand of Thrawn
Specter of the Past
Vision of the Future
Union
Scourge

22 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Junior Jedi Knights
The Golden Globe
Lyric's World
Promises
Anakin's Quest
Vader's Fortress
Kenobi's Blade
Survivor's Quest

23 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Young Jedi Knights
Heirs of the Force
Shadow Academy
The Lost Ones
Lightsabers
Darkest Knight
Jedi Under Siege
Shards of Alderaan

24 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Young Jedi Knights
Diversity Alliance
Delusions of Grandeur
Jedi Bounty
The Emperor's Plague
Return to Ord Mantell
Trouble on Cloud City
Crisis on Crystal Reef



**NEW JEDI ORDER
25-36 YEARS AFTER
STAR WARS: A New Hope**

25 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

New Jedi Order
Vector Prime
Invasion
Volume One: Refugees
Volume Two: Rescues
Volume Three: Revelations
New Jedi Order
Dark Tide: Onslaught
Dark Tide: Ruin
Agents of Chaos: Hero's Trial
Agents of Chaos: Jedi Eclipse
Chewbacca

26 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

New Jedi Order
Balance Point
Edge of Victory: Conquest
Edge of Victory: Rebirth

27 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

New Jedi Order
Star by Star
Dark Journey
Enemy Lines: Rebel Dream
Enemy Lines: Rebel Stand
Traitor

28 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

New Jedi Order
Destiny's Way
Force Heretic: Remnant
Force Heretic: Refugee
Force Heretic: Reunion
The Final Prophecy

29 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

New Jedi Order
The Unifying Force

35 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Dark Nest
The Joiner King

36 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Dark Nest
The Unseen Queen
The Swarm War



LEGACY

**40-139 YEARS AFTER
STAR WARS: A New Hope**

40 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Legacy of the Force
Betrayal
Bloodlines
Tempest
Exile
Sacrifice
Inferno
Fury

41 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Legacy of the Force
Revelation
Invincible
Crosscurrent
Riptide

43 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Millennium Falcon
Fate of the Jedi
Outcast
Omen
Abyss
Backlash

44 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Fate of the Jedi
Allies
Vortex
Conviction
Ascension
Apocalypse
X-Wing
Mercy Kill

45 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Crucible

137 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Legacy
Volume One: Broken
Volume Two: Shards
Volume Three: Claws of the Dragon
Volume Four: Alliance
Volume Five: The Hidden Temple
Volume Six: Legacy
Volume Seven: Storms
Volume Eight: Tatooine
Volume Nine: Monster
Volume Ten: Extremes

138 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Legacy
War

Legacy II
Volume One: Prisoner of the Floating World
Volume Two: Outcasts of the Broken Ring

139 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Legacy II
Volume Three: Wanted: Ania Solo
Volume Four: Empire of One

Contents

The Golden Globe	01
Lyric's World	87
Promises	165
Anakin's Quest	247
Vader's Fortress	335
Kenobi's Blade	415

Book One
The Golden Globe

Prologue

Nothing could have prepared him for the girl who stood before him. Her hair was pale yellow, the color of the sands of the Dune Sea on Tatooine. It moved in swirls, as if an invisible wind was stirring it. And her eyes, as they met his own icy blue ones, were the color of the green rivers that rushed across the surface of Yavin 4. There was no shyness in the smile that crinkled the corners of her eyes and made their color dance in waves. Anakin said nothing. He was lost for a moment in the events that had brought him to this place. That had brought him to this room, and this girl.

Chapter One

“Anakin, we’ll miss you,” Leia Organa Solo said to her son.

Leia and her husband, Han Solo, stood with their younger son, Anakin, by the silver shuttle that would take the boy to Yavin 4. That was the moon where Leia’s brother, the Jedi Luke Skywalker, had created a Jedi academy. The academy was built to train people to become Jedi Knights, protectors of freedom and justice. Only beings who had shown they were skilled in working with the Force had been invited to attend the academy. Anakin was one of those chosen to attend the first session created for younger children and aliens.

Anakin was sensitive to the Force. He had been aware he possessed the ability to alter, understand, and control his surroundings ever since he could remember. It was just little things. Anakin could feel other people’s emotions if he tried really hard. He could lift small objects with his thoughts.

Added to these talents was the fact that he was smart. Very smart. Even his own sister and brother-the twins Jaina and Jacen-admitted that their kid brother was a genius. By the age of five, Anakin knew how to take apart computers and put them back together. He loved any kind of puzzle, whether it was taking apart machinery and learning how to rebuild it or figuring out difficult word games with his mind. When Anakin turned eleven

Nancy Richardson

years old his parents agreed it was time for him to attend the Jedi academy. Anakin showed too much ability to be kept at home.

When Jaina and Jacen returned from their time at the academy, his parents agreed to send their younger son there to study. Leia wouldn't have been able to bear sending all of her children to Yavin 4 at one time. She would have missed them too much. Jaina and Jacen had now returned. It was Anakin's turn to leave. Leia studied her younger son. Anakin was about 150 centimeters tall. He was slender and had brown hair that constantly fell into his eyes. He had Luke's eyes-ice blue and full of strength and curiosity. But his quiet nature and concentration came from his mother.

Leia smiled. Perhaps her younger son would grow up to help rule the New Republic, as she did. Or perhaps he would become a starship pilot and a Rebel hero like his father, Han Solo. If Anakin did grow up to be like his father, Leia wouldn't have a moment's peace, she knew. She would always worry about the trouble Anakin might be in. But for now Anakin would live on Yavin 4, a safe, quiet moon orbiting the giant gas planet Yavin.

Leia knew that her brother Luke would take care of his nephew. Still, she couldn't help worrying about her child. She sensed that the Force was very strong within him. And while she was proud of his power, she worried that it might lead him into danger. Anyone who had the power to become a Jedi and use the Force for good also ran the risk of being lured into using the Force for evil and personal gain-that was the dark side of the Force.

Leia watched Anakin say good-bye to his brother and sister. She almost wished that Anakin had a twin too. That way he wouldn't be alone on Yavin 4. Her younger son did not have many friends. His brother and sister and the droid See-Threepio were really his closest companions. "Stop worrying, Leia," Han said to his wife. He could hear her worry as clearly as if she'd spoken. "Come here, kiddo, and say good-bye to your old dad,"

STAR WARS: The Golden Globe

Han called to his son. Anakin came over to hug his father. Han ruffled his son's hair. Then he brushed it out of Anakin's eyes.

"I'll be fine, Dad," Anakin said.

He could feel his father's worry, just as he could feel his mother's. His kid was so strong, Han thought. But for a moment he, too, worried about the power of the Force in Anakin. Then Leia pulled her son into a tight hug.

"Call us if you need anything," Leia said. Or if you want to come home, Leia thought.

"I promise," Anakin answered his mother. Then he stepped inside the shuttle and waved to his family from the window by his seat. Anakin was all alone now. He settled back into his chair to think. Anakin thought about his parents and their fears. What they didn't understand was that their younger son had not been afraid to leave his home planet of Coruscant. Anakin had seen the look of worry in his mother's eyes as she and his father had said good-bye to him.

But Anakin wasn't worried. He was traveling to Yavin 4, where Uncle Luke had created a Jedi academy to train the young who were gifted in the Jedi ways. Anakin knew that just as his twin brother and sister Jacen and Jaina were sensitive to the Force, he was too. No, Anakin wasn't afraid, but he was silent during the journey to Yavin 4. There would be so much to learn in the next few months, and Anakin wanted to think about what lay ahead.

"We'll be landing in five minutes," the shuttle commander informed his young charge.

Anakin turned, his ice blue eyes peering out the window, making a sweep of Yavin 4's surface. He'd read all about the moon. Still, its lush jungles, rivers, and waterfalls took his breath away. It was so unlike the city he had just left. So beautiful and wild. With an impatient toss of his head he swept long dark bangs from his eyes as the shuttle dove toward an enormous stone structure. Anakin knew that this was the Great Temple, an ancient building that had been on Yavin 4 long before Luke

Nancy Richardson

Skywalker had chosen it for his Jedi academy. There were several other temples and palaces on the moon, but most were falling apart.

It was said that some were more than four thousand years old. Anakin wondered if he would have the chance to explore those buildings. He hoped so.

Chapter Two

Once the silver shuttle was safely settled on the Great Temple's landing field, its door opened with a hiss. Anakin walked onto the launch bay and into the waiting arms of his uncle, the Jedi Master Luke Skywalker. Luke wore a black jumpsuit. His hair was a few shades lighter than Anakin's. But his eyes were the same bright blue.

"Anakin, welcome to the academy," Luke said with a smile.

Anakin hugged his uncle, then bent to say hello to Luke's companion, the silver, blue, and white droid ArtooDetoo. Artoo's red lights blipped and beeped at the boy, but Anakin couldn't understand anything the droid was saying.

"He says he's glad that you're finally here," Luke explained.

Over the next few hours Luke showed Anakin around the academy and told its history.

"The Great Temple was one of many palaces built by the Massassi," Luke explained. "They were a race of people who once lived on Yavin 4. They disappeared from the moon long before it was discovered by the Rebel Alliance."

Anakin knew what the Rebel Alliance was. It was the name for the men, women, and aliens who had fought to bring back justice and freedom to the galaxy. His mother, father, and Uncle Luke had been part of that group.

Nancy Richardson

“The Great Temple was renovated years ago by the Alliance and used as a secret base,” Luke explained. “Then it was found by the Death Star and abandoned.”

The Death Star, Anakin remembered, was the battle station of the Empire. That was the Rebel Alliance’s enemy.

“When the Death Star found the Alliance base on Yavin 4, a war followed. Some of the temples on this planet were damaged by crashing TIE fighters, but the years have also taken their toll on them. However, the Great Temple was undamaged, so we decided to use it for the Jedi academy,” Luke said.

Anakin ran his fingers along the stone blocks that lined the hallways of the academy. He wondered what the Great Temple had looked like long ago, and what the Massassi people had been like.

“The Great Temple hasn’t been changed much on the outside,” Luke said. He had sensed his nephew’s curiosity. “But we had to change the inside in order to create the academy rooms. We’ve divided some spaces into sleeping and refresher units for you and your classmates. And we’ve hung heavy drapes above the open windows. The windows in the Temple have no glass because the climate here is so warm that we rarely need it. However, every few months we have terrible storms. The temperature drops and rain and winds whip through the jungle. When that happens the heavy drapes keep the temple warm and dry. There’s one place that we haven’t touched, though—the Grand Audience Chamber at the top of the Temple. All of the instructors and students here agree that it is just too beautiful to change,” Luke explained.

Luke and his newest student continued to walk through the academy. Every few minutes Luke stopped to introduce Anakin to his Jedi instructors.

“Anakin, this is Tionne,” Luke said when they stopped before a silver-haired humanoid woman with enormous pearl-colored eyes. Anakin shook Tionne’s hand.

STAR WARS: The Golden Globe

“Tionne is a Jedi Knight and she also loves to collect old Jedi legends and songs,”

Luke told the boy. “Come on, I’ll introduce you to some of your fellow students,” Luke offered. “You were the last to arrive for this session of the academy.”

The two went through a large wooden doorway and entered the dining room. Luke walked his nephew from table to table, making introductions. Anakin had rarely seen so many different creatures under one roof. There were aliens of all different colors—red, green, purple. Some had bodies like birds, others looked like snakes, and some had eight or ten arms and several eyes.

“There are many beings who are sensitive to the Force,” Luke explained to his nephew. “Whether they are human or alien is not important. The only thing that matters is that everyone in this room is dedicated to becoming a Jedi Knight and using the Force for good.”

This is going to take some getting used to, Anakin thought as he scanned the room. But making friends wasn’t Anakin’s biggest concern. He was a loner, and even at home his only close friends were his brother and sister and Threepio. No, he was at the academy to learn how to understand and use the Force—an energy field binding all living things. That was what gave Jedi Knights their power. And more than anything else, Anakin wanted to be a Jedi Knight. Not just because his brother and sister were training to be Jedi, although he had been jealous when they had left to study at the Jedi academy months before.

No, Anakin wanted to be a Jedi Knight. Not just because his brother and sister were training to be Jedi, although he had been jealous when they had left to study at the Jedi academy months before. No, Anakin wanted to be a Jedi Knight because he knew in his heart that he had been born to be a Jedi Knight.

By dinnertime Anakin had met so many new people that his head was spinning. All he wanted was some time for himself. But he could not escape from the rest of the students until after

Nancy Richardson

dinner. At one point he tried to sneak out of the dining hall, but Tionne saw him, and just as he was about to slip away, Anakin felt her hand on his shoulder.

“Do not be so shy,” she said gently. Anakin had to bite his lip to keep from telling the silver-haired humanoid the truth. He wasn’t shy; that was a mistake even his mother and father made. He just liked to spend time by himself - time thinking. Anakin made a note that the first thing he would have to do was to learn the best times to sneak away from the group.

Finally dinner ended, and Anakin set off to explore the Temple by himself.

“Bleep, bleep.”

Oh no, Anakin thought, and stopped in his tracks. He turned to see ArtooDetoo scooting up behind him.

“Go back to Uncle Luke,” Anakin commanded the droid. Artoo came to a halt before him, bleeping once. “I don’t know what you’re saying but I want to be alone,” Anakin said. Artoo still did not turn to leave. “Okay, you can come with me, but please don’t make any noise. I want to think,” explained Anakin. Artoo was silent.

At least he understands me, Anakin said to himself as he began to walk down a long stone hall.

“Bink, bleep, bobeep.”

Anakin shook his head, but kept walking.

“Artoo, we have got to learn how to communicate if you are going to follow me around,” he grumbled at the droid. Anakin came to the base of a stone stairway at the end of a long corridor.

“These stairs will be too difficult for you to climb, Artoo-guess this is where we part company,” Anakin said to the droid with a sly smile. Then he turned and began to climb the stairs, gently running his fingertips along walls that narrowed as he moved upward. At the top of the stairway was a large wooden doorway, different from the doors that dotted the halls of the Temple. It was carved with symbols Anakin didn’t recognize-shapes that curved and twirled in a beautiful pattern.

STAR WARS: The Golden Globe

Anakin had reached the Grand Audience Chamber. It was the highest room in the Temple, and unlike the other rooms, it had not been rebuilt for the academy. Gently Anakin pushed open the large doors. He walked into the center of the Grand Audience Chamber. The walls were a deep tan stone, worn smooth over the years. Blueleaf shrubs, the most common shrub on the moon, poked through several cracks in the stones. They attached themselves to the stone with suckers. The shrubs were electric blue, and as Anakin leaned close he could smell a spicy perfume.

He walked slowly toward a large window. The view was breathtaking. Anakin looked down on the jungle. It was carpeted with blueleaf, and filled with Massassi trees whose bark shone purplish brown. Weaving through the trees, he could see sparkling green rivers that rushed along the moon. Beautiful, Anakin thought.

“Who are you?” a voice sang out behind Anakin.

Anakin whirled. A young girl stood before him. Pale yellow hair, green eyes, an orange academy jumpsuit, and bare feet.

“Bantha got your tongue?” she giggled as she moved to Anakin’s side by the window.

She couldn’t have been more than ten years old, Anakin thought.

“My name is Tahiri and I’m nine years old,” the girl sang out in a voice that sounded like a bubbling stream.

Anakin didn’t reply. He was annoyed that she had interrupted his thoughts. Annoyed that she had found the Grand Audience Chamber.

“Where are your shoes?” Anakin finally said to break the silence.

“I don’t wear any-never, not ever,” Tahiri began. “I’m from Tatooine. I’m one of the Sand People.”

Anakin’s jaw dropped down in wonder. He had never seen one of the Sand People without their heavy robes and the strips of cloth, breath masks, and eye protectors they wore over their

Nancy Richardson

face, and didn't know anyone who had. Tatooine was a harsh desert planet, and the people needed all the protection from the sand, sun, and wind they could wear.

"Well, I'm not actually one of the Sand People, but I've lived with them since I was four years old," Tahiri continued. "I was an orphan, and they found me in the desert and took care of me." She moved to the large wooden bench by the window and perched on it. Then she resumed her story. "Luke Skywalker's assistant, Tionne, discovered me while she and Luke were visiting Tatooine. They spent time with me and discovered that I'm strong in the Force. I didn't know what they meant at first. But they explained that the little things I could do-like sense emotions and find things that were misplaced-were a special power. So Tionne rescued me from the desert and brought me to this moon. Not that I needed rescue. The Sand People are all right, and I did have my own bantha as a pet-you have seen a bantha, haven't you?" Tahiri asked Anakin. She didn't wait for an answer. "Banthas are animals with long, thick fur. They have spiral horns. On Tatooine we ride them and use them to carry things. Anyway, Tionne brought me here because she says that I have Jedi potential. Guess that's why you're here too, huh?"

Once again Tahiri did not wait for an answer.

"Best thing about this place is that I don't have to wear long white robes and cover my face and mouth like I did on Tatooine-I hated that! Oh, and I don't ever have to wear shoes if I don't want to-I made Tionne promise me that the moment I arrived at the Great Temple," Tahiri explained, wriggling her bare feet. "I made her promise because I love the feeling of the Temple's cool clean stones under my feet. Where I'm from it's hot and there's sand everywhere - gritty sand that sticks between your toes. So, aren't you going to say something?" she finally asked Anakin.

Anakin had to laugh. "It's pretty hard to get a word in with you talking all the time," he explained.

Tahiri thought for a moment.

STAR WARS: The Golden Globe

“Sorry about that. It’s just that on Tatooine there wasn’t anyone near my own age to talk to. I guess I’m pretty lonely for a friend.”

“I guess I could use a friend too,” Anakin admitted. After all, his brother and sister were back on Coruscant with their parents, and Anakin already missed them, more than he could say.

“Then it’s settled—we’re best friends now,” Tahiri said with a grin. “So are you going to tell me your name?”

“My name is Anakin Solo,” he replied softly.

Chapter Three

Jedi instructor Tionne found her newest student, Tahiri, in the Grand Audience Chamber. She had come to take the girl to her sleeping quarters. There had not been a chance to show the active young student where she was to sleep since the girl had arrived on the moon that morning. For the last few hours Tionne had had a hard enough time just keeping her eye on this last - minute addition to the young Jedi class, a class that had been carefully selected and then brought to Yavin 4 over the last week for classes that would begin tomorrow morning.

Tionne walked through the wooden doorway and paused, watching Tahiri talk to Anakin Solo. Tionne was happy to see that the child had begun to make a friend. She had known that Tahiri wasn't shy. In fact, the girl rarely stopped talking. But Tionne had been worried that the other students would be put off by her nonstop chatter. It was understandable, though, since the girl hadn't had any human her own age to talk to for almost six years.

"Tahiri, I've come to show you to your room," Tionne said.

Tahiri looked away from her new friend and toward the silver-haired Jedi.

"I'm not tired. I want to stay and talk with Anakin," Tahiri replied. Tahiri wasn't used to anyone telling her when to sleep, or

STAR WARS: The Golden Globe

where. On Tatooine everyone took care of themselves. If you were tired you slept. If you were hungry you ate. And if you were thirsty... Well, if you were thirsty you hoped to find water somewhere in the desert.

Tionne smiled at Tahiri.

“You are not on Tatooine anymore,” she said. “And you will follow the rules of the Jedi academy.”

Tahiri frowned and her bright green eyes clouded. She really did hate being told what to do. But she stood up from the bench. She would follow Tionne for now.

“Young Anakin, it is almost time for lights out,” Tionne informed the boy. “All of our young students must be in their rooms and ready for bed four standard hours after nightfall,” she continued.

Anakin nodded. He was used to being told when to go to bed. On Coruscant his mother and father had made him go to bed at about the same time.

Anakin, Tahiri, and Tionne left the Grand Audience Chamber and descended the stairway to the next floor of the Temple. Artoo was still waiting at the base of the stairs for Anakin, and when the boy reached the bottom of the stairs the droid once again followed him. Several times he bleeped and beeped, but Anakin ignored the droid.

“Well, this is my room,” Anakin said softly when he reached a door. “Good night, everyone.”

He pushed open a large wooden door and entered the room.

“This way, Tahiri,” Tionne said. The two continued down the hallway until they reached another door. “This is your room. When you hear the wake-up bell tomorrow morning please use your refresher unit to clean up and then come down to the dining room.”

Tahiri scowled, then stepped inside the room. Tahiri stood with her back to the wooden door. She had never had her own room before. On the planet Tatooine all of the Sand People slept outdoors in encampments on blankets on the ground. Now

Nancy Richardson

Tahiri was looking around her very own room. She couldn't believe it! There was a large sleeping pad in the far corner, covered with soft white blankets. A dresser and a closet were on the wall to her left. Several orange jumpsuits hung from hooks in the closet. There was also one pair of shoes on the floor.

No chance I'm going to wear those, Tahiri thought as she looked at the shoes. She walked toward another doorway directly across from her bed. It led to her very own refresher unit. I can't believe this place, she thought. Tahiri had never even had a shower before she'd left Tatooine. There was barely enough water to drink on the planet. A shower was unheard - of! Luke and Tionne had made Tahiri take one on their shuttle. She smiled.

The way they had wrinkled their noses when she had unwrapped herself from the white robe she wore had been funny. She must have really smelled awful. Tahiri had to admit she'd liked the warm shower. And she liked the orange jumpsuit they'd given her even more. It was so much more comfortable than her robe had been. Tahiri rubbed her feet along the cool stone floor. The clean stones felt wonderful. She changed into her nightgown, raced across the floor, and leapt onto her bed. Tahiri sank into the blankets. So soft and fluffy, she thought dreamily. Maybe she was ready to sleep after all, she thought right before she drifted off.

Tahiri began to dream. It was the exact same dream she'd had on Tatooine. The same dream she'd had every few weeks of her life for as long as she could remember. She was floating along a green river in a long silver raft with rounded sides. Before Tahiri had come to Yavin 4 she had never even seen a river. Strange to have imagined something I've never seen, she thought in her dream.

Tahiri could feel the cold water lap her hands as she paddled in the raft. A storm was brewing. The wind was growing stronger, and the water began to hit the sides of the raft in powerful waves. Tahiri paddled harder, her muscles beginning to

STAR WARS: The Golden Globe

ache. She had to reach the side of the river before her raft was turned over by the swell. A giant wave swept over the front of the raft. Tahiri was hit full force, and her small body was sent flying backward.

She fell from the raft and was quickly swept into the cold river water. This was the part where she usually woke up. But not this time. This time Tahiri felt the waves tumbling over her, smacking her face and filling her nose and mouth with water. She could feel herself desperately struggling to breathe.

Why hadn't she woken up? She thrashed through the water trying to get back to her raft. She could still see it above the tumbling waves. And then she saw him. It was the boy she'd just met. Anakin Solo was in her raft. And he was paddling toward her. He held a silver paddle out. It rose and fell from her vision as she was carried along wave after wave. Tahiri knew that she was supposed to reach for the paddle, that if she didn't she would surely drown.

But she couldn't grab it. It was too far away. She saw Anakin screaming at her, but she couldn't hear his words. The water was swallowing her up. And then suddenly the cold silver paddle was within reach and she was again grabbing for it. But just as her fingers began to close over it a loud bell sounded.

Tahiri awoke with a start. Strange, she thought groggily, I've had the same dream on Tatooine ever since I was a small child, but the dream usually ends when I fall into the river. I've never almost drowned, or been saved by a boy. There has never been anyone else on the river with me. Tahiri dropped her feet over the side of her pad and stood. Her nightgown clung to her body in sweaty spots.

Yuck, she thought, and headed to the refresher unit. In my dream I was on Yavin 4, Tahiri thought as she showered. In fact, it looked like the river that runs by the academy. But where was I going? And why was Anakin Solo in my dream? Tahiri wondered.

"I think I should get to know my new friend Anakin better if he's going to turn up in a dream I've been having my whole life,"

Nancy Richardson

Tahiri muttered as she slipped on her jumpsuit. She opened her door and headed to the dining room, determined to understand her strange dream.

Chapter Four

“We need to talk, Anakin,” Tahiri said as she arrived at the morning meal and sat down at the breakfast table beside her new best friend.

Anakin wasn’t a morning person.

“Oh hi,” he said with a grumble as Tahiri sat across from him. “Look, I don’t like to talk in the morning,” he tried to explain.

“Nonsense. You don’t like to talk period,” Tahiri replied. “Last night I did all the talking. Now I want to know a little bit about you.”

Tahiri wasn’t ready to tell him about the dream. That would have to wait until she could be sure that he wouldn’t laugh at her. She hated to be laughed at.

“Go on,” she prodded when Anakin still hadn’t spoken.

“You’re not going to leave me alone no matter what I say, are you?” Anakin asked grumpily.

Tahiri just stared at him, her green eyes glowing. Anakin hated telling people about himself. He swallowed, then quickly began to recite his family history.

“My mother and father are famous. My mom is Leia Organa Solo and she’s a princess from the planet Alderaan and chief of state of the New Republic. Both she and my father, Han Solo, were Rebel heroes. My uncle is Luke Skywalker, the famous Jedi

Nancy Richardson

Master and the founder of this academy. The entire family is almost too much to live up to.” Anakin growled. “Okay, are you satisfied now?”

“You don’t have to live up to them,” Tahiri said matter-of-factly. “You aren’t them and they aren’t you.”

“Easy for you to say,” Anakin replied. “I would rather have a family than not have one at all,”

Tahiri shot back.

“I thought your family were the Sand People,” Anakin said.

“They are, but not really,” Tahiri answered. “The Sand People found me in the desert. But my real parents were moisture farmers on Tatooine. My parents had machines that pulled water from the air. That water was used on the planet for drinking and farming. I don’t really remember them. The Sand People said they were killed when I was four. I’m not sure how they died, though.”

“I’m sorry,” Anakin said.

“Don’t feel sorry for me,” Tahiri replied fiercely. “I’m lucky that the Sand People found me in the desert. Just like I’m lucky that Luke and Tionne found me on Tatooine.”

“You’re right,” Anakin agreed. He was beginning to feel more at ease with Tahiri. He took another bite of food, then said, “I even have an older brother and sister. They’re 13 years old and their names are Jacen and Jaina.”

“What are they like?” Tahiri asked her friend.

“Well, Jacen is pretty wild. He loves spending time outside. He collects bugs and gets into a lot of trouble. Jaina is more like me. She likes taking things apart and then figuring out how to put them together. I don’t get to spend too much time with either of them. They were on Yavin 4 for the past few months studying. Now I’m here,” Anakin explained.

“You miss them, don’t you,” Tahiri said.

“Yeah. They’re my best friends,” Anakin admitted.

“Well, now you have me,” Tahiri said with a quick grin. “And I have something I need to tell you. Last night I had a dream-the

STAR WARS: The Golden Globe

same dream I've had most of my life for as long as I can remember. It's a strange dream. Strange, because in it I'm rafting on a river, and before yesterday I'd never seen a river. In fact, before I came to this moon I'd never seen so much water in my life. Anyway, I'm pretty sure that this dream I've been having has always taken place here, on Yavin 4. Which is truly weird, don't you think, because this is my first time here." Tahiri didn't wait for Anakin's comments. "Anyway, in the dream I'm always rafting a river when a terrible storm begins. The winds howl and the water of the river grows into giant waves. One of the waves hits me and I'm thrown out of the raft. That's when I usually wake up. But last night I didn't wake up. Instead I almost drowned. I didn't, though, because the breakfast bell rang and I was woken up. But that's not important right now. What's important is that for the first time in all the years that I can remember dreaming this exact same dream, someone else was in it too. That someone was in my raft, and when I was swept into the river he held out a silver paddle to save me from drowning. The boy who held out that paddle was you!"

Anakin was silent. So this was what his brother Jacen was always talking about. I guess girls do get crushes on boys and say things that make no sense, he thought.

"Aren't you going to say anything?" Tahiri asked impatiently.

"Well, I don't think it's so strange that you had a dream with me in it," Anakin began. "After all, we met last night right before you went to sleep."

"Don't flatter yourself. You're not so terrific that I'd have a dream about you for no reason," Tahiri retorted, her irritation showing in her flashing eyes.

Now she's upset with me, Anakin thought with wonder.

"Don't be annoyed, Tahiri," he said. "I just thought that might be one explanation."

"And what about the river, the storm, and the fact that my dream has always taken place here, on this moon, when I've lived in the desert all my life?" Tahiri asked in exasperation.

Nancy Richardson

“Well, you said yourself that you can hardly remember anything about your life before the Sand People adopted you. Maybe you’ve been here before,” Anakin suggested.

“Been where?” Luke Skywalker asked his newest student as he walked up behind her. Tahiri whirled around to face the Jedi Master.

“Nowhere,” Tahiri huffed. She kicked back her chair and stalked from the table.

“Making friends so soon, young Anakin?” Luke asked with a smile. Anakin gave a feeble grin and then he, too, rose and left the table. He wanted to find Tahiri to apologize for whatever he’d done wrong. The girl talked too much, but she was his new friend and he didn’t want to hurt her feelings.

Chapter Five

There was no time for Anakin to talk to Tahiri before the bell rang for the first class of the Junior Jedi Academy. Anakin walked into the Grand Audience Chamber and looked for her. He spotted her blonde hair in the third row and quickly slid in beside her. Tahiri pretended not to see him. Anakin tried to apologize, but she just stared at the large block walls to her left. Guess I'll try later, Anakin thought. The large assembly hall walls were dark green blocks of stone. Polished wooden benches were set in rows. In the front of the room was a small platform. The students filed into the rows.

They spoke quietly as they waited for Luke Skywalker to enter the room. Some had never heard the Jedi Master speak. But even those who had were excited. Luke Skywalker was their hero. Luke walked silently into the room. He stepped onto the platform and began to speak to the newest and youngest class of the Jedi academy.

"The Jedi Code: A Jedi's promise must be the most serious, the deepest commitment of his or her life. A Jedi's strength flows from the Force, and a Jedi uses this strength not to seek adventure or excitement, for a Jedi is passive, calm, and at peace," Luke explained.

Nancy Richardson

The room was quiet as Luke Skywalker spoke. Tahiri even stopped running her bare feet along the smooth classroom floor. Anakin could feel the excitement in the room. Each of the twenty Jedi candidates was thrilled by Luke's words.

"A Jedi knows that anger, fear, and aggression lead to the dark side," continued Luke. "A Jedi uses the Force for knowledge and defense, never for attack. For a Jedi there is no 'try,' only 'do.' Believe and you succeed. Above all else, know that control of the Force comes only from concentration and training."

Luke Skywalker stopped speaking and stood studying the students. He met each one's gaze, pausing for a moment when he reached Anakin. He could already sense the power of the Force in the boy. It was so strong for one so young, he said to himself. Luke understood Leia and Han's worry. When the Force was strong it attracted attention from evil men and women, who might want to use Anakin to serve the dark side. He would have to keep a sharp eye on his nephew. Then Luke moved on to Tahiri. He had a special place in his heart for the young girl. Tahiri was from Luke's home planet of Tatooine. Luke had been a farm boy, raised by his aunt and uncle, Owen and Beru Lars. Luke had hated the desert planet. It was so hot and dry, and he had been bored-that is, until he met two droids that his uncle had purchased. Their names were See-Threepio and ArtooDetoo. The droids had come to Tatooine in search of the Jedi Master Obi-Wan Kenobi.

They had a message for him from Princess Leia of Alderaan. She was being held prisoner by Darth Vader. Vader was an evil man who was overseeing construction of the Death Star-the Empire's battle station. Luke followed ArtooDetoo to Obi-Wan, and the Jedi told Luke about his family. Obi-Wan said that Luke's father had been a Jedi Knight and had been killed. Obi-Wan promised to train Luke. And that was how his life as a Jedi Knight had begun.

Luke looked at Tahiri. She was an orphan. Although no details were known about their deaths, her parents had been

STAR WARS: The Golden Globe

killed on Tatooine. Tahiri had been raised by the Sand People as their own. But Luke understood that Tahiri had never been one of the Sand People. She had been just as bored on Tatooine as he had been. On a recent trip to the planet, he and the Jedi Knight Tionne had immediately sensed the power of the Force within her. Tahiri was meant to be a Jedi Knight, Luke knew. But he also knew that someday Tahiri would have to make a choice. He had promised the Sand People that he would return Tahiri to Tatooine when she was ready to decide whether she wanted to remain with them or continue her training as a Jedi Knight. Luke hoped that she would choose to stay at the academy, but that would be her decision.

“You are all here because the power of the Force is strong within you,” Luke said firmly. “You are here because the New Republic needs Jedi Knights. And you are here because it is your destiny to train to become Jedi Knights and use the Force when necessary to maintain peace in our galaxy. Over the next month your instructors will begin to train you to see the Force in everything around you. You will learn to use the Force to see far-off places, defend yourselves, and do things you never believed possible. Just remember that the Force must never be used in anger or aggression. Otherwise you will be serving the dark side, the evil side.”

The room remained silent.

“I want to tell you about the dark side,” Luke said softly. “Because if you understand it, you will not be drawn to it. When I was a boy I was told that my father had been a Jedi Knight. I was told that he had been killed by an evil man named Darth Vader. Darth Vader was a man who helped build the Death Star created by Emperor Palpatine in order to control the galaxy through fear and violence. I met Darth Vader in a battle on Cloud City. It was during this battle that I learned that my father had not been killed by Vader. My father was Darth Vader.”

Nancy Richardson

Anakin could hear his friend Tahiri gasp. He wondered if he was the only student in the room who already knew this entire story.

“My father had once been a man named Anakin Skywalker. He was an expert pilot. He was trained as a Jedi Knight by Obi-Wan Kenobi. My father understood the Force. But he chose to use it to gain power. That choice turned him to the dark side—the place where a Jedi’s powers are used in anger. You all know that Darth Vader and the Emperor almost destroyed the Rebellion. If they had won, none of you would be here now. If they had won, the entire galaxy would be run by evil men and women. That is the power of the dark side of the Force. Remember it.”

Luke closed his eyes and took a deep breath before he continued.

“As new candidates it is important that you understand the rules of the academy. Above all, you are here to study. Since you are the youngest class ever to come to this moon, we have imposed several rules for your safety. No one is to leave this area without permission. Although Yavin 4 is quiet and peaceful, it can be a dangerous place. In addition, you are all from different worlds and have different ways of living. That means that you will have to get used to each other. There is to be no fighting among you. Patience and understanding are important skills for Jedi candidates to learn. Failure to follow the rules of the academy may result in your being sent home.”

He paused, then said, “Now it is time to begin. Please follow the instructors to your classrooms.”

The students rose and filed from the room; some scooted on eight legs, some walked, and several of the birdlike creatures hopped.

“Did you catch that word, ‘destiny?’” Tahiri whispered to Anakin as they left the room.

“Shhh, I’m thinking,” Anakin whispered back. He didn’t tell her that he was thinking about his own name. He had been named after Luke and Leia’s father. He had been named after

STAR WARS: The Golden Globe

Anakin Skywalker, who was Darth Vader. He tried to remember that his uncle Luke had finally been able to reach the good buried inside Vader. That in a battle between the light and dark side of the Force, Luke's father had turned against the dark side to save his son's life. Still, Anakin was a scary name.

Tahiri ignored Anakin and continued to whisper. "Anakin, the word 'destiny' means to do something you are meant to do. I have this weird feeling that destiny has brought you and me together. I know you're not going to like this, but I think we are meant to raft the river on Yavin 4. That's why you were in my dream last night. I think we should sneak out of the academy and go raft the river."

"What?" Anakin said. "Are you crazy? We just got here. We're here to learn about the Force, to become Jedi Knights. If we sneak out we might get into trouble. And if that happens my parents would be told." Anakin had a brief flash of their disappointed faces. He could just hear Jacen and Jaina scolding him. "No way," he whispered fiercely to Tahiri. There was no way this girl was going to get Anakin to disappoint his family or risk the chance that his uncle might decide he was too much trouble to have at the academy. No way.

That night the dream came. Anakin knew it was the same one Tahiri had spoken about. But instead of Tahiri, it was Anakin who sat inside a long silver raft.

In his hand was a silver paddle and he was leaning over the rounded side of the raft, stroking the cold green water. It lapped over his hands until they felt like ice, but he continued to paddle. Where am I going? Anakin wondered. He stared at the giant trees that hung over the river. He recognized them as being from Yavin 4 - they were Massassi trees, their bark a purplish brown. But where was the storm Tahiri had told him about? Almost in answer to his question, Anakin heard a rumbling from behind him. He looked over his shoulder and saw a massive black cloud rolling through the sky toward him. He began to paddle harder. He had to get to the side of the river before the storm hit. His

Nancy Richardson

arms ached with effort. The water began to strike his raft in waves and the wind almost tore the paddle from his icy hands.

This dream seems so real, Anakin thought wildly as he struggled to reach the shore. The wind whipped his hair into his face and he almost didn't see her. It was her orange jumpsuit that caught his eye. Tahiri was in the rapids in front of him. She was struggling to keep her head above the waves. Anakin desperately paddled toward his friend. He tried to shout to her but he couldn't even hear his own voice above the storm. And then Tahiri saw him. For a split second Anakin's ice blue eyes met her frightened green ones. He watched as Tahiri struggled toward the paddle he held out to her. She kept getting swept beneath the swells. Swim, Anakin screamed in his mind.

Tahiri's hand shot toward the paddle and her fingers closed around it, then slipped away. She was swept out of sight beneath the wild water. Anakin leapt from side to side in the raft trying to spot Tahiri beneath the swells. He had lost her. Then he heard a soft sound in the distance and realized it was the academy wake-up bell.

The river slowly faded before his eyes. Anakin walked down the corridor to the dining room. He wasn't ready to talk to Tahiri about his dream. He wasn't ready to admit that maybe his friend was right, that maybe something was pulling them both to that river. Whether or not it was destiny Anakin wasn't sure. But he did know that he didn't want to have the dream again. It had been terrifying.

Chapter Six

“You look terrible,” Tahiri sang out to Anakin as he sat down at the dining hall table beside her.

And he did. There were deep purple circles beneath his eyes. Anakin looked like he hadn’t slept a wink.

“Trouble sleeping?” Tahiri asked as she stuffed her mouth with a roll.

Anakin was silent. Tahiri turned to face her friend squarely.

“Are you still mad about my idea of going rafting?” she whispered.

No answer.

“Well, don’t be. For the first time that I can remember I didn’t have a dream about the river last night. Maybe telling you about it broke some sort of cycle. Now I’m free,” she said with a giggle. “So don’t worry, we don’t have to sneak out of the academy, and I’m sorry for suggesting such a risky idea.”

“Yes we do,” Anakin replied.

Now it was Tahiri’s turn to fall silent. Finally she sputtered, “What in the name of the Great Bantha are you talking about?”

“The reason you didn’t have that dream last night is because I did,” Anakin replied softly as he stared at his uneaten meal. “I dreamt I was in a raft on the river, and it was just like you said,

Nancy Richardson

only I was the one paddling and you weren't there. At least not until later."

"What happened later?" Tahiri said under her breath. She wondered if Anakin could sense the fear in her voice.

"You drowned," Anakin quietly replied. "I tried to save you," he added, "but the river was too strong. I'm sorry." Anakin hung his head. He was ashamed he hadn't been able to save his friend. It was only a dream, he knew, but he also knew it was more than that.

Tahiri was staring at him. She looked scared.

"You don't have to go with me to the river, Tahiri," Anakin said. "But I feel like I'm being pulled there and I think I've got to go see why."

"Why don't we talk to your uncle Luke about this? Maybe he should come with us," Tahiri suggested.

"No!" Anakin cried. It was the first time Tahiri had heard him speak in a voice much above a whisper. "We can't tell Luke Skywalker. If we do then everything will be lost," Anakin said fiercely.

"What are you talking about, Anakin?" Tahiri asked.

"I don't know," Anakin replied in a surprised voice. "But when you suggested we talk to Uncle Luke I heard a voice inside my head. It said that we can't tell Uncle Luke or everything will be lost."

"What will be lost?" Tahiri asked.

"I don't know," Anakin said with a look of frustration. This was not what he wanted. He was on Yavin 4 to study. To become a Jedi Knight. Now there was a strange voice inside his head telling him to keep something from his uncle Luke. Telling him to sneak out of the academy to raft a river. And the worst part was that he believed in the voice, felt that what it said to him was right. More than that, he believed that the voice came from a Jedi Master. In it, he had heard a strength and calm that was similar to his uncle's voice. Perhaps this unknown Jedi Master

STAR WARS: The Golden Globe

needed Anakin to perform an important task, a task that would pave the way for his becoming a Jedi Knight.

But what if he was wrong about the voice? What if he was being drawn to the dark side of the Force? What if, he wondered, it's calling me just as it did my grandfather Anakin Skywalker? There was only one way to find out.

"I guess I better start figuring when to sneak out of the academy," Anakin mumbled. "You mean *me* better,"

Tahiri said with a grin. "And don't worry, if we get kicked out of the academy-not that I think we will-you can come home with me."

"And be one of the Sand People?" Anakin replied with a little laugh. "Thanks, but no thanks." Anakin fell silent. He wasn't sure he should let Tahiri come with him to the river. After all, she had drowned in his dream. "Tahiri, maybe you shouldn't get involved in this," Anakin began.

"I know that you're worried about me drowning," Tahiri replied. "But I have to come with you. We've both had the dream, and that means we're both supposed to raft the river. Something is calling to us, Anakin," Tahiri said in a faltering voice. "And even though I'm scared, I'm going with you. "

"The raft will be at the edge of the river," Anakin whispered to Tahiri the following morning across their class desks.

"How do you know that?" Tahiri whispered back.

"I just know-that same voice, the one that told me we can't talk to Uncle Luke about our dream, told me last night," Anakin replied. He stared in frustration at Tahiri. She wanted answers that he just didn't have. Last night, right before he'd fallen into the same dream, he'd heard the voice. It told him not to worry. That the raft he and Tahiri needed would be at the edge of the river. That they should both sneak out of the academy and go to the raft.

"What if the voice is evil?" Tahiri whispered in a frightened voice. "What if we're being pulled to use the Force to seek adventure and excitement instead of using it for calm and peace

Nancy Richardson

like your uncle Luke warned? I don't want to serve the dark side like Darth Vader did--"

"Are you saying that because Darth Vader was my grandfather?" Anakin asked in an insulted voice. "Because if you can't trust me then you shouldn't come with me." Anakin couldn't meet Tahiri's eyes when he said these words. He was afraid. Afraid that Tahiri saw some evil in him. Something that made him the same as his grandfather.

"No, Anakin, I didn't mean that you are anything like Darth Vader. It's just that we're trusting some strange voice inside your head," Tahiri explained. "How do we know that the voice is good?"

"I just know, Tahiri," Anakin replied in a trembling voice. "And I'm going to figure out a way to sneak out of the academy in the next few days. "

Tahiri stared at her friend. She understood why Anakin was so upset. It wasn't just the voice in his head. If he got caught, she knew, a lot of people would be disappointed in him. His mother and father, his brother and sister. Luke Skywalker. Tahiri didn't have to worry about anyone caring whether or not she was sent home. That made it easier to take the risk. Still, Anakin was driving her crazy. She fixed her friend with an irritated look.

"Is there a problem here?" instructor Tionne asked her students as she walked up to their desks.

"No problem," Anakin replied. "Except that neither of us seem to be able to lift this two-kilo weight off our table with our minds," he said as he pointed to the work he and Tahiri were supposed to be doing.

"Then maybe you're doing something wrong," Tionne replied.

Both students turned and focused on the large hunk of metal that Tionne had easily lifted onto their desk. The metal moved a centimeter at most. Anakin looked around the room. Several of the other students had succeeded in lifting an object with their minds. Across the room were two students who looked like huge

STAR WARS: The Golden Globe

black flies. They had each lifted their weight. Now they were happily buzzing. Anakin stared at them. They weren't stronger in the Force than he and Tahiri. He was sure of that. So why couldn't he and Tahiri perform this feat?

"We're not concentrating," Tahiri said, interrupting his thoughts. They tried again, but the metal would not move.

"All of you have different strengths," Tionne said. "You are here to figure out where your strengths lie."

In frustration, Anakin squeezed his eyes shut and forced his mind to reach into the object. Be light, he commanded. At the same time, Tahiri was focusing on lifting the object. Anakin opened his eyes just in time to see the metal shoot toward the classroom's ceiling.

Wham! It struck with a thud. Both Anakin and Tahiri lost their concentration and barely avoided being hit by the weight on its way back down. It landed on their table. The table broke in two.

"Good," Tionne said, hiding a smile. "You're learning your strengths."

The rest of the students began to laugh. Anakin scowled. Tahiri giggled.

"How did we do that?" Tahiri whispered to Anakin when the class had settled back to work.

Anakin shrugged.

"Beats me. It's weird, but I was asking the metal to be lighter and when I opened my eyes it was shooting toward the ceiling. What'd you do, Tahiri?"

"I just tried again to lift it," Tahiri said. "Guess we somehow make a good team," she added. She looked at Anakin and said softly, "Okay,... Anakin, if you say the raft will be there, then it will be there. And don't think I'm not coming with you. Wild banthas couldn't keep me from sneaking out to the river. After all, I've never been rafting before - except in my dreams. Did you know that?" Tahiri didn't wait for an answer. "There's just one

Nancy Richardson

thing I've got to tell you before we go, Anakin: I don't know how to swim."

"I already figured that out," Anakin said with a frown. "I guess that's one of the reasons we've got to be aboard that silver raft *together*." Anakin tried to smile at his friend. But in his heart he was scared. What if he couldn't save Tahiri when she fell into the river? What if his dream came true?

Chapter Seven

Tahiri tiptoed across the floor of her bedroom. She quietly slipped her orange jumpsuit over her nightgown and moved silently to the door. She pushed gently on it, then poked her head into the hallway. No one was there. She crept down the hall. Her bare feet padded softly on the smooth stones. When she reached Anakin's door she knocked once. Anakin had been waiting for his friend. He pushed his door open and Tahiri quickly went inside. It was almost midnight. All of the instructors and students at the academy were sound asleep. But Tahiri and Anakin had not been able to sleep. They needed to plan how they were going to sneak out of the academy. Tahiri curled up on the cushion next to Anakin's bed. Anakin sat crosslegged beside her.

"What if we both pretend that we're sick," Tahiri suggested to her friend.

Anakin made a face. "Both of us? They'll never believe we're both sick," he said.

"Why not?" Tahiri asked. "Well, first of all my uncle Luke knows that I've rarely been sick in my life. If I pretended to be sick he'd be really worried. He'd probably call my parents and send me home."

He frowned. "Maybe we should just sneak out at night," he said. "After all, everybody is asleep."

Nancy Richardson

Tahiri shook her head. "It won't work," she said.

"Why not? We'd have hours to explore," Anakin said.

"Because in the dream it's daytime," Tahiri explained. "We have to do exactly what we do in the dream, otherwise we're not following our destiny."

"Tahiri, I don't think we should blindly follow what you believe is our destiny," Anakin replied. "Following our destiny is a pretty romantic notion. It's important, but we have to take other things into consideration."

"Like what?" Tahiri demanded. "Are you talking about that strange voice again?"

"Yes and no," Anakin began. "I think you're right that we are in some way meant to take the silver raft of our dream down the river of Yavin 4. And I think we're meant to do it together. But not just because we've had the same dream. I think there is a lot more involved. And yes, I do mean the voice inside my head. It's real, Tahiri," Anakin said softly. "It's real, and it's not just any voice. I'm just about certain that it's the voice of a Jedi Master."

"How do you know that?" Tahiri cried in surprise.

"I just do," Anakin said. "And the voice leads me to believe that we are both needed somewhere. I don't know where, or why, but it is the voice that I'm following, not just the call of destiny."

"So where does that leave us?" Tahiri asked. "Are we going to raft the river at night?"

"No, I think you're right about going in the daytime, for two reasons. First, it is light in our dream, and that fact may be important. But second, and more important, we should go during the day simply because we don't know where we're going or what we're looking for. Whatever it is we are being drawn to will be easier to see in the light."

"So will we," Tahiri said slowly. "I know that you don't want to think about this, Anakin, but there's a good chance that we are going to get caught. We might even get sent home."

STAR WARS: The Golden Globe

Anakin frowned. He knew that Tahiri was right. "I guess we should just figure out how to sneak away from the academy. And after we raft the river we'll try to get back without anyone seeing us. But we shouldn't count on it," Anakin finally said.

"So how do we sneak out?" Tahiri asked her friend.

Sneaking out of the academy was going to be hard. The instructors would be able to sense their emotions. They would have to be very careful to hide their excitement. It took several hours before Anakin and Tahiri came up with a good idea. Each afternoon the students were given two hours of free time before dinner. The friends decided that they would leave the academy during this period. The only problem was that two hours wasn't a lot of time. Especially since Anakin and Tahiri didn't know exactly where they were going. But it would have to do. More and more, Anakin felt certain that he and Tahiri were being called to the river for a reason-and that it was a matter of grave importance.

"What day do you want to go?" Tahiri asked Anakin. He sighed before he answered. "I guess tomorrow afternoon. That means you only have to fall into the river one more time in the dream," Anakin said with a small smile. He knew that falling into the river was terrifying for Tahiri. He didn't want to make her do it any more than she had to.

"Where should we meet?" Tahiri asked her friend.

"The hangar bay in the bottom of the Temple. It has an exit door that opens into the jungle," Anakin said.

"How do you know that?" Tahiri asked in surprise.

"It's that voice in my head again," Anakin explained. Tahiri frowned.

Anakin didn't say anything, but he knew that she was worried that they were trusting that voice too much. After all, it could be leading them to use the Force for evil. Anakin sighed. There was only one way to find out.

Nancy Richardson

“We’ll leave after our morning class and go down to the hangar,” he said firmly. “Then we’ll sneak out of the Great Temple and make our way to the river.”

Tahiri nodded in agreement. With luck they could get back to the academy before the bell for the evening meal, she thought. She didn’t want to think of what would happen if they didn’t return in time.

“I guess we should get some sleep,” Anakin said with a yawn. It was almost dawn. In a few more hours the bell for the morning meal would ring.

“It’s a good plan,” Tahiri said as she stood up from the cushion. Her orange jumpsuit was rumpled. And her long blonde hair had fallen out of her braid. It hung loose around her shoulders. “Hey, Anakin, if we do get caught and get sent back home, can we still be friends?” Tahiri asked.

Anakin smiled at Tahiri. “Sure thing,” he replied.

But he knew that his home planet was far away from Tatooine. If he and Tahiri were sent home they might never see each other again. Anakin met Tahiri’s green eyes with his blue ones. He could see she also knew this might be their last few hours as friends.

“Sweet dreams,” Tahiri said before she left Anakin’s room.

Anakin fell asleep quickly. And he had the river dream again. Except this time both he and Tahiri were in the raft. Anakin was in the back, paddling hard.

Tahiri sat in front, gripping one side of the raft. The water was crashing in waves over the sides. The wind howled and tossed the small raft sideways just as a gigantic wave slammed it. Tahiri was thrown backward. Anakin turned to spot her in the water, and the surprise of what he saw almost made him fall in too.

“Oh no,” Anakin moaned when he saw that ArtooDetoo was now in the raft with him. “I can’t be expected to sneak out with that noisy droid,” he cried. But even as he searched the water for Tahiri he knew that tomorrow he would bring Artoo with them.

STAR WARS: The Golden Globe

If Artoo was in the dream, then he was meant to be a part of the adventure. Anakin knew that, but it didn't mean he had to like it. A soft bell rang in the distance. Anakin realized it was time to wake up and begin the adventure for real. He rolled over and slowly opened his eyes.

Chapter Eight

“Tahiri, there’s been a slight change of plans,” Anakin whispered to his friend over breakfast. “We have to take ArtooDetoo with us.”

Tahiri’s jaw dropped. “I don’t understand. Why should we take Artoo?”

Tahiri didn’t receive an answer. She studied her friend for a moment before she spoke again. Anakin looked exhausted. Ever since he’d begun to have her dream, tired purple circles started to appear under his eyes. Tahiri, on the other hand, had slept wonderfully the last few nights. She hadn’t had the dream once.

“Anakin,” Tahiri began again, “you’ve got to be kidding. We can’t take that droid. He’ll ruin everything. We can’t even understand him. And if he fell into the river we’d never be able to get him out,” Tahiri added without stopping for a breath.

“He was in my dream last night,” Anakin said softly. “That means that we might need him wherever we’re going.”

“And we might *not* need him,” Tahiri said with a scowl. “I thought we weren’t going to follow our dreams without question,” she added.

“Better safe than sorry?” Anakin asked his friend.

“That’s true,” Tahiri sullenly admitted. “Well, how are we going to get him to sneak away with us?”

STAR WARS: The Golden Globe

“Leave that up to me,” Anakin said with a little smile.

It was hard to concentrate on schoolwork that morning. Both Anakin and Tahiri kept looking at their wrist-chronometers. They were excited, nervous, and scared. It seemed like years before class was over. When the other students had filed out of the room, Anakin sauntered over to ArtooDetoo.

“Hey, Artoo, want to show me around the rest of the Great Temple during my free time?”

The droid beeped several times.

“I take it that means yes,” Anakin muttered. “Good. There’s just one thing. We need to develop a way to understand each other. Let’s start with one beep for yes and two beeps for no, okay?”

Artoo beeped once.

“Let’s go, buddy,” Anakin said with a smile. Anakin and Artoo headed away from the group down one of the hallways. Tahiri quickly caught up to them. The three rounded a corner and Anakin checked to make sure no one was behind them. Once he was sure they were alone he and Tahiri began to race down the hallway. Artoo whistled in surprise, then scooted to follow them. Anakin knew that his uncle Luke had probably asked the droid to keep an eye on him. He’d banked on Artoo’s following him once he and Tahiri started running. Tahiri’s bare feet slapped on the stone floor as they tore down the stairs that led to the hangar bay.

She didn’t see Anakin stopped in front of her until she’d crashed into his back. He didn’t have to warn her to be quiet. She immediately spotted Luke Skywalker and Tionne. They were walking down a hallway on a lower level. A door opened to their left and the two Jedi disappeared inside. Anakin and Tahiri both sighed in relief and then began to run again. By the time they reached the hangar both were out of breath, and Artoo had stopped beeping. Anakin and Tahiri opened a large wooden door and slid into darkness. Artoo followed behind them. They began running their hands along the stone walls, seeking the exit door.

Nancy Richardson

"I can't find it," Tahiri said in a desperate voice. Then a thought struck her. "Anakin, the lower level of the Temple is partially underground. How can there be a door?" Tahiri cried.

"There has to be some kind of exit to the jungle," Anakin whispered in the darkness. "The voice said so. We must be doing something wrong." Anakin dropped to his knees and began searching the floor of the storage room. There was a chance that they were looking for the door in the wrong place. His fingers ran along the smooth surface. All of a sudden his left thumb caught on something. It was a thick crack. He traced the crack with his fingers. It was in the shape of a large square. "Tahiri, I think I've found it," he called.

Tahiri ran over to Anakin and saw the outline of a trapdoor on the floor beneath her.

"How do we open it?" she asked. Artoo began to beep-beep. "Quiet, you silly droid,"

Tahiri whispered angrily. Artoo kept double-beeping.

"He's saying no," Anakin said under his breath. Anakin looked up and saw the droid standing by a large wooden handle in the wall.

"You're trying to tell us that we're doing this all wrong, aren't you," Anakin whispered to the droid. "Give it a try your way, Artoo," he said. The droid reached up and pulled down the handle with his metal arm. Instantly the doorway in the floor opened. Anakin looked down. A narrow passage of stone blocks led away from the trapdoor.

"This must be the way," Anakin said as he slid into the passage. "Come on, you two," he called from the darkness.

"You first," Tahiri said to the droid. Artoo beeped once and moved forward to the trapdoor. He tipped slightly backward, then rolled into the passageway and out of sight.

"My turn," Tahiri whispered. Then she, too, dropped out of sight. A few minutes

later, hot, moist air hit the three as they entered the jungles of Yavin 4.

STAR WARS: The Golden Globe

“Follow me,” Anakin called as he raced toward the river. Artoo beeped several times.

“I think he knows where he’s going, buddy,” Tahiri said to the droid.

They began to follow Anakin. Tahiri had to stop a few times to help Artoo, who kept getting tangled in the blueleaf shrubs. Anakin was already by the long silver raft when Tahiri and Artoo got to the edge of the river.

“Told you the raft would be here,” he said with a shy smile. Tahiri hopped in and they lifted Artoo over the rounded sides of the raft, then pushed it off from the bank. Anakin jumped in at the last second.

“Well, at least we’re not rafting in a storm like we do in the dream,” Anakin said as he began to paddle.

Tahiri sat in the front of the raft staring down at the water. This place is amazing, she thought. Enormous Massassi trees hung down over the river, their branches arching. The sunlight danced off the clear green water. The only thing that keeps this afternoon from being perfect is Artoo, Tahiri thought. Since they had begun rafting he hadn’t stopped whistling and beeping.

“Can’t you make him be quiet?” Tahiri asked Anakin.

“He must have something on his mind, because he hasn’t stopped whistling for ten minutes,” Anakin replied.

“I wish I’d had more time to figure out a way to understand him.” Tahiri turned back to face the droid. She was going to make Artoo be quiet, even if she had to disconnect his speaker. But when Tahiri turned around she couldn’t say a word. She was too shocked by what she saw.

“Ah, Anakin, I t-t-think we m-might have a problem,” Tahiri finally managed to say.

“What’s that?” Anakin asked as he paddled. “I think Artoo has been trying to tell us to look behind the raft,” Tahiri replied.

Anakin turned quickly. The sky of Yavin 4 had become black. Large purple storm clouds rolled across it. In a flash the sun was

Nancy Richardson

covered and Yavin 4 grew cold and dark. The wind rose, tearing over the river.

“What’s going on?” Tahiri yelled to Anakin above the roar of the wind.

“I’m not sure, but I think this might be ‘one of the terrible storms Uncle Luke told me about when I got to Yavin 4. He said that every few months strong winds and rains tear across the moon,”

Anakin told Tahiri. He didn’t tell her that his uncle had also said that perhaps the only safe place to be during the storms was the Great Temple. Tahiri’s sea green eyes grew dark, just like the water of the river. She saw the waves begin to form.

“This is going to be just like my dream,” she said in dread. “Only this time I might really drown.”

“Don’t think that way, ‘Tahiri,” Anakin commanded. “Just hang on. I’ll try to paddle us to land.”

Tahiri gripped the side of the raft. The water was now crashing over them in giant waves. The raft tipped dangerously to one side. Tahiri’s blonde hair whipped around her face. For a moment she couldn’t see. Artoo beeped loudly behind her. Then a gigantic wave hit her and she toppled backward. She couldn’t see anything as she tumbled. Then she was in the water. It was bitterly cold. Every time she tried to gasp for breath another wave struck her. Tahiri felt herself beginning to drown.

Help me, Anakin, she screamed in her mind. But all she could see was water. And all she could hear were her own cries.

Chapter Nine

“Grab the paddle, Tahiri!” Anakin screamed above the storm. He could barely see his friend in the tumbling waves. Her orange jumpsuit flashed between the rolls of water. He watched as Tahiri struggled toward him, her arms thrashing wildly.

“I can’t reach the paddle!” she cried.

“Try again,” Anakin yelled.

Tahiri tried, but was once more swept beneath a wave. She was running out of strength. Anakin didn’t know what to do. He had power in his arms, but that couldn’t help his friend.

“There are all different kinds of power,” a strange voice spoke inside Anakin’s head.

“What does that mean?” Anakin screamed into the wind. There was no answer. He turned toward Tahiri. “Try again,” he called. But this time his voice wasn’t a scream-it was a command, a command said with the power of the Force. Anakin knew that some Jedi Masters could use their voices to control people. Could it be that he also had that ability? He watched as Tahiri thrashed toward the paddle he was holding out to her. She seemed stronger than before, but Anakin wasn’t sure how much longer she could hold herself above the water. He closed his eyes and focused on Tahiri’s body, just as he had focused on the two-kilogram weight that he and Tahiri had lifted in class. Be light, he

Nancy Richardson

commanded. Anakin opened his eyes and saw that Tahiri's head and shoulders were now above the water. Before another wave could sweep Tahiri away, she grasped the paddle.

"Hang on," Anakin instructed. He leaned over to pull his friend toward him. A large wave hit the side of the raft. Anakin lost his balance and began to fall into the river. For a brief flash his eyes met Tahiri's. They were filled with fear. If Anakin fell into the river they might both drown. Anakin knew he wouldn't be able to concentrate on making Tahiri light or giving her strength if he had to focus on keeping himself afloat. Anakin watched the wild river dance before his eyes. He knew he was about to plunge into the cold water. He could feel his body falling out of the raft.

But just as he was about to be caught by a wave he was yanked hard from behind. Artoo had grabbed the back of Anakin's orange jumpsuit with his metal hand and pulled him to safety.

Anakin then grasped one of Tahiri's hands and dragged her into the raft. He turned to Artoo.

"Thanks," he said softly. Artoo bleeped.

Anakin grabbed his paddle and began to furiously stroke. Tahiri lay in the bottom of the raft.

"Anakin," she said with wonder, "you used the Force to get me to float and to give me the strength I needed to thrash my way to the raft. I was ready to give up, but your voice wouldn't let me."

Anakin gave his friend a smile. Then he turned back to the river.

"We're almost at the shore," Anakin said. "Tahiri, we're going to have to jump out of the raft. The river is going too fast. There's no way I can get the raft to stop."

Tahiri sat up.

"What about Artoo?" she asked. "He can't leap into the river."

STAR WARS: The Golden Globe

“We’ll have to do what we did in class the other day,” Anakin said. “After we jump I’ll think about him being light, and you try to lift him.”

There was no time to talk about it.

“Okay, it’s time,” Anakin said as their raft raced by the side of the river. “Jump!”

Both students landed hard on the bank of the river and then rolled to a stop.

“Now Artoo,” Anakin yelled to Tahiri. The droid was still on the raft. He was being swept quickly down the river. Anakin and Tahiri concentrated. Artoo floated in the air toward them. Suddenly he dropped in the water.

“Oops,” Tahiri muttered. Then she closed her eyes and focused. Moments later Artoo landed safely beside the two students. Both Anakin and Tahiri stared down the river as their silver raft continued to race along the waters.

“Guess we’re not *rafting* back to the academy,” Tahiri said under her breath. It had begun to rain—not just to rain, but to pour. “We’ve got to find some shelter,” Tahiri said to Anakin.

The three raced into the jungle in search of a place to hide from the storm. The weather was getting worse. The wind was so strong that it almost carried Tahiri away, and she had to wrap her arms around the trunk of a Massassi tree every time it blew.

“There’s nowhere to hide!” Tahiri cried.

Anakin grabbed his friend’s hand and pulled her deeper into the jungle. They were surrounded by Massassi trees, climbing ferns, and large, deep pink flowers. Jungle animals, their fur blue and gold, raced across the floor of the jungle. They must be the woolamanders that Jacen described to me, Anakin thought. But they usually lived in the tops of the Massassi trees, he remembered. Anakin guessed that the storm had brought the animals to the ground, that the woolamanders were looking for a safe place to hide too.

“Are those animals dangerous?” Tahiri asked her friend as they ran through the jungle.

Nancy Richardson

"I think they're called woolamanders, and if I remember right my brother said that they only eat plants," Anakin shouted.

They saw hundreds of woolamanders as they ran. Several times the two friends had to stop to wait for Artoo, who kept getting caught on roots and shrubs. Meanwhile the storm was getting worse. If they didn't find shelter soon they would be in real trouble.

"Hey, Tahiri! Look over there," Anakin said. Tahiri saw the outline of a building. They ran through the jungle until they reached it. It looked kind of like the Great Temple, but much smaller. And it was in ruins.

"I think this is one of the structures that was built by the Massassi people," Anakin said.

"Who are they?" Tahiri asked.

"They were a race who used to live on this planet," Anakin explained. "They disappeared thousands of years ago."

"Well, then they won't mind if we go inside," Tahiri giggled.

They ran to the palace. Anakin stopped outside the door to the crumbling building. High above him were dark letters carved into the tan stone. The letters were not Basic.

"I wonder what those symbols mean," he said.

"Who cares-let's get inside," Tahiri yelled. Artoo bleeped in agreement, and the three headed through the doorway. Inside the palace it was dark. Tahiri heard the clicks of hundreds of scurrying feet.

"Anakin, do you hear that?" she whispered. Anakin pushed his wet hair out of his eyes and tried to see in the darkness.

"I hear it, but I can't see anything," he replied.

With a beep and a click, Artoo lit up the room with a beam of light.

"I knew there was a reason we brought him along," Tahiri said. They stared around the room. Thousands of tiny black eyes stared back. Woolamanders were everywhere!

"Yes, I'm sure of it-they don't eat people," Anakin said to Tahiri. He had sensed her fear.

STAR WARS: The Golden Globe

“Okay, but I still don’t have to like them,” Tahiri muttered.

“This must be the Palace of the Woolamander,” Anakin said. “It was named years ago by some guy who was exploring the planet. The woolamanders must have been here then too.”

“As long as we’re here, let’s explore,” Tahiri suggested.

Why not, Anakin thought. It had been a long time since they’d snuck out of the academy. Heck, Luke Skywalker was probably thinking up some kind of punishment, or maybe even getting the shuttle ready to take them home. It couldn’t hurt to do a little bit of exploring.

Chapter Ten

Anakin and Tahiri walked through a large stone hallway in the Palace of the Woolamander. Anakin noticed that the same letters he'd seen carved above the door were repeated on the stone walls inside the palace. Tahiri interrupted his thoughts.

"So what happened to the Massassi?" she asked.

"Nobody really knows," Anakin replied as he ran his hands along the palace walls. "But there was one story about them that my father once told me," he said. Anakin's voice echoed in the empty hallways as he began to tell Tahiri the story. "Years ago there was a man named Dr'uun Unnh. He was from the star system Sullust. Dr'uun Unnh was a Sullustan. Have you ever seen one?" Anakin asked Tahiri. She shook her head.

"Well, Sullustans are humanoids with round ears, large round eyes, and heavy cheeks that hang down their faces. Anyway, Dr'uun Unnh was a history and nature lover, and he spent a lot of his life studying Yavin 4. He studied all of the old temples on this planet. By digging beneath the temples he learned about the Massassi. "According to Dr'uun," Anakin continued, "over five thousand years ago the exiled Sith magicians - whom nobody knows much about except that they're feared and that Darth Vader was one - settled on Yavin 4. The magicians married the natives to create the race of Massassi. A thousand years later an

STAR WARS: The Golden Globe

evil Jedi Knight named Exar Kun came to Yavin 4 to enslave the Massassi, build more temples, and resurrect the Sith teachings. Exar Kun was wiped out in the Great Sith War, which pitted the Old Republic and the Jedi Knights against the followers of Kun, who called himself the Dark Lord of the Sith.”

“That story gives me the chills,” Tahiri said. “Especially the part about Darth Vader being part of the Sith.”

“Yeah, me too,” Anakin agreed. Tahiri and Anakin could still hear the storm raging outside the palace walls. They turned a corner and stood before a crumbling wall of stone blocks. “I guess this is a dead end,” Anakin said. They were just about to turn around when Artoo’s light stopped at a hole in the wall. Tahiri walked forward and peered through the hole. She could see a long stone stairway that wound down through the floor of the palace. Before Anakin could stop her Tahiri had crawled through the hole.

“Wait, Tahiri,” Anakin called. “Someone built this wall so that we wouldn’t go down those stairs,” he said. “Well, the wall is crumbling, so maybe now we’re meant to go down,”

Tahiri called back. Artoo began to beep and blip loudly. “I don’t think he wants us to go down there,” Anakin said. “And he’s not the only one.”

Anakin had poked his head through the hole and could actually sense something evil floating up the stone stairs. The hairs on his arms rose. Artoo continued to beep - beep. Anakin crawled through the hole and joined his friend. Tahiri hadn’t started down the stone stairway.

“There’s something evil here,” she whispered in a small voice. “Anakin, what if those Dark Lord guys are still here?”

“Maybe we should turn back,” Anakin whispered.

“No,” Tahiri said fiercely, her green eyes flashing. “We’ve come this far. I’m not going to turn back just because I sense that something bad is trying to scare us away. Anakin, you said that you felt like we were being called to perform an important task, maybe it’s something that will help us become Jedi Knights.

Nancy Richardson

If that's true, there's no way I'm going to turn back. " Tahiri began to make her way down the stairway. There were loose stones and several times she almost fell.

"Tahiri, wait," Anakin called, but she kept moving. Anakin rushed down after his friend. This is not the way I like to do things, Anakin thought. I like to think, to figure out the choices. He slid his feet along the broken stairs. He thought about the fact that Darth Vader had been a part of the Sith. He always tried not to think of Vader as his grandfather. But Vader had once been Anakin Skywalker, Luke and Leia's father. And that made him Anakin's grandfather. But that was before he began using the Force for evil and became Vader. Anakin wished his parents hadn't named him after his mom's father.

He had once asked his mother why she had chosen to name him after Vader.

"You weren't named after Darth Vader," Leia had explained. "You were named after my father. He was Anakin Skywalker, not Vader. And before he died your grandfather did turn away from the dark side. He died saving your uncle Luke's life." Leia had told Anakin that it was important to remember that the power of the Force could turn even a good man to the dark side. "Anakin, to me your name reminds me of hope," Leia had explained. "Hope that even when a Jedi uses the Force for the dark side he can choose to turn back to the light. Just as my father Anakin Skywalker did."

Right now Anakin didn't need any reminders about the dark side-it was all around him. It coated the walls of the stairway in sticky darkness. Anakin could feel it trying to cover him. It tugged at the sleeves of his jumpsuit and swirled around his head. He pushed it aside with his mind and followed his friend down the spiral stairway. Whatever was down there, he and Tahiri would meet it together.

"I am going to get kicked out of the Jedi academy for this," Anakin said under his breath as he climbed down the stairway.

STAR WARS: The Golden Globe

“Not only that, I’m probably going to run into that Dark Lord of the Sith and end up in even bigger trouble.”

Anakin could hardly see Tahiri’s back in the darkness as the two climbed down the stairs. And he could barely hear Artoo beeping in the distance. The stairway was too broken and winding for the droid to manage, so Artoo had stayed behind. Anakin was sure that the droid was telling them both to come back.

“Tahiri, will you please wait for me? I can’t see anything,” Anakin called out. Without Artoo’s light, which had been lost right after the stairway turned away from the crumbling wall, it was almost impossible to see. At least if Tahiri was right in front of him, he said to himself, he would be able to tell where to walk.

“I can’t see any better than you can,” Tahiri called back. “This is quite an adventure, isn’t it, Anakin,” she began to chatter. “We’d probably just be looking at holographs if we were back at the Temple right now. Instead we’re-yipes!”

Anakin had heard his friend begin to fall before she’d cried out, and now there was a quiet rumble as the stone she was on gave way.

“Tahiri, are you okay?” he called as he tried to move quickly down the stairs. He could barely see her when he bent down.

“Yeah, I think so,” she said. “Serves me right for talking so much instead of concentrating on where I was going.”

Anakin smiled in the darkness. He moved to help Tahiri to her feet.

She gave a small yelp.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“My foot is caught under something,” Tahiri explained.

Anakin searched the darkness around Tahiri’s foot with his hand.

“Your foot is wedged under a heavy stone,” Anakin groaned as he tried to move the rock.

Nancy Richardson

“Let’s do this together,” Tahiri suggested. They concentrated on using the Force. Slowly the stone rose and then fell to one side. Tahiri pulled her foot out of a small hole.

“Is it broken or cut?” Anakin asked.

Tahiri bent down to feel her bare foot. “Not a scratch,” she said in amazement. A moment later her hand brushed against something. Something that was not another rock.

Chapter Eleven

“What is this?” Tahiri muttered as she lifted up the object by her foot. She ran her hands over the thing. It was strangely smooth and thin.

“Let me feel it,” Anakin said. Tahiri handed it to him. He ran his fingers along it until he reached what felt like two wide bumps. There were four thin, short objects coming out of the bumps. Each of them was about five centimeters long. They were all bent in several places. Anakin closed his eyes. He knew what this was.

“Let’s keep going,” he said in a weak voice.

“What is it, Anakin?” Tahiri asked. She could tell her friend knew exactly what the object was.

“You don’t want to know,” Anakin told her.

“Yes I do,” she replied stubbornly.

“All right. I’m pretty sure that it’s an old bone.”

“A bone from what?” Tahiri asked.

“I think it’s the arm and hand bone of one of the ancient Massassi,” Anakin explained. “What’s more, I think it was a child’s.”

Tahiri was silent.

“Do you want to turn back?” Anakin gently asked his friend.

“No,” Tahiri replied. “We have to go on.”

Nancy Richardson

“Okay. But since you won’t turn back, at least let’s do this together, ” Anakin said. They joined hands and slowly walked downward. The stone staircase was much longer than Anakin had imagined. It wound in a tight spiral deep into the surface of the planet. At certain spots the stairway was so narrow that Anakin could touch the stone walls on both sides of it. The walls felt sticky.

“We must be hundreds of meters down,” Tahiri said. “Why would someone build such a big staircase and then block it with a stone wall?” she asked out loud. “Somebody must have wanted to keep wherever we’re going a big secret,” Tahiri answered herself breathlessly. A moment later she stubbed her toe. “Ouch, I wish we had a glowrod,” she grumbled.

“We won’t need one in a few minutes,” Anakin replied.

“How do you know that?” Tahiri asked.

“I just have a feeling,” Anakin said slowly. The two tightened their grip on each other’s hand. The stairway circled ten more times. But just as Anakin had said, light began to appear. But the light was not like the light from Artoo. It was a dusting of glittering gold that appeared in spots on the stairway and the stone walls. The gold glowed in the dark.

Tahiri touched one of the spots and her finger began to tingle. Moments later they heard the voices.

“Go back,” came the rumbling moans. “Go back or fear for your lives,” the voices called.

Anakin could almost hear his own heart pounding.

“We are the followers of the ancient Sith teachings. We are sworn to protect this place from intruders. Go back or die!”

Tahiri stopped, her hand clenching his tightly. “Did you hear that?” she whispered.

“Yeah,” Anakin said shakily.

“Maybe we should get out of here,” Tahiri suggested.

Anakin wanted nothing more than to agree. He desperately wanted to race up the stairs and back into the light. He was terrified that he was being drawn to the dark side of the Force,

STAR WARS: The Golden Globe

that something was trying to turn him toward evil. But Anakin couldn't turn back. He knew in his heart that there was a reason that he and Tahiri were here. He also knew they might never get another chance to find out that reason, that it would be impossible if they were kicked out of the academy and returned to their home planets.

"Tahiri, you go back if you want," Anakin whispered. "I have to go forward. I don't know why, but I know that the voice I heard in my head was not something evil calling me."

"This is a dark place. You are not welcome here. Only those that serve the dark side of the Force can stay," the evil followers of the Sith teachings rumbled.

Tahiri began to shake. She hated being afraid almost as much as she hated being told what to do. Anakin squeezed her hand tightly, and Tahiri stopped shaking.

"Anakin, I won't go back. We're a team," Tahiri said in a tiny voice. "Anyway, if those voices could really hurt us, they'd be doing just that. Right, Anakin?" she asked.

Anakin didn't answer. The two friends moved forward. The evil voices began whispering their threats.

"Go back... go back... or strike at us to kill us."

"Quit it!" Tahiri finally screamed. She'd had enough of the voices. "We don't want to listen to you anymore!" she shouted into the darkness. "And we won't use the Force for evil. We believe in using the Force for peace, knowledge, and defense, not to attack. So just be quiet."

The voices stopped.

"And Anakin," Tahiri said in exasperation as she turned to face her friend. "Stop thinking that you are the only one that beings who serve the dark side of the Force are interested in. I'm hearing those voices too. Just because your grandfather was Darth Vader doesn't mean you are going to serve the dark side of the Force. You aren't your grandfather. You are your own person, and you can make your own choices."

Nancy Richardson

Anakin was speechless. He thought he had kept his feelings private; he hadn't known that Tahiri understood about his grandfather. But he did know that some of what Tahiri had just said was true. He wasn't Anakin Skywalker. He was Anakin Solo, the son of Han and Leia. Still, he couldn't help wondering if there was something evil planted within him. Something that would make him use his powers to serve the dark side of the Force. After all, he was directly related to Darth Vader.

"I don't know if yelling at those voices was a good thing or a bad thing," Anakin finally said.

"At least whatever it was has shut up," Tahiri grumbled.

Anakin grabbed his friend's hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. They circled down again, and suddenly Anakin and Tahiri found themselves on the last step of the stairway. They had finally reached the bottom. Before them was a small stone room that glowed with golden light. There were patches of golden glitter everywhere. They seemed to be seeping from the wall at the far end of the room. Anakin moved to the wall and gently touched the stones with his fingers, which soon began to tingle.

"The gold is coming from behind this wall, Tahiri," Anakin whispered. "There must be a hidden room back there."

But how were they going to move thousands of kilos of stone? Anakin wondered. Sure they had lifted Artoo, and even a two-kilo hunk of metal, but this was different.

As if reading his mind, Tahiri said softly, "I guess we should give it a try."

Sweat dripped down Anakin's forehead. He had been trying to move the stone blocks for a long time. Tahiri rubbed her fingers against her eyes. The strain of trying to move the stones had given her a terrible headache. Neither of the two Jedi students had been able to move the blocks even a centimeter. They walked over to the last step of the stairway and sat down.

"I don't want to give up," Tahiri began, "but this just isn't working."

STAR WARS: The Golden Globe

Anakin nodded at his friend's words. There has to be another way, he thought; maybe strength isn't the answer. Then he heard the voice in his head again. He turned to Tahiri, his blue eyes open wide.

"The voice in my head just spoke again," he said softly. "It said that there are different kinds of strength. One is physical, like the lifting of the droid. Another is the strength of the mind."

Tahiri stared at her friend. For once she was speechless. Anakin thought about those words. He and Tahiri had proven that they could move heavy objects. But their use of the Force was still limited; they were not powerful Jedi yet.

What exactly was "the strength of the mind."? What had the voice in his head meant? He remembered a gift his father had once given him. It was a laser puzzle, the kind that had thousands of smaller puzzles within it. His father had said it would take his strength to figure them out. But it hadn't taken any muscle for Anakin to solve the puzzle. He had used his mind, not his body.

"That's it, Tahiri!" Anakin cried. "The stone blocks are a puzzle that we have to figure out with the strength of our minds. We solve the puzzle, and we'll find out what's behind that wall!"

Chapter Twelve

“I’ve never been very good at puzzles,” Tahiri said to Anakin.

“It’s not that hard. You just have to look for patterns,” Anakin explained. “Try to look at the shapes of the stones or the cracks between them. Maybe you’ll see something in them,” Anakin offered. Together he and Tahiri walked along the stone wall.

“All I see is a lot of gold glitter,” Tahiri grumbled. She still had a splitting headache. “Hey, this looks like an arrow,” Tahiri said, pointing to a crack in one of the stones. It was a dark brown, and wiggled in a curving line up the stone wall. “There’s another one,” she cried.

Anakin stood beside his friend.

“You’re right—there are at least five arrows that I can see from here. And they all seem to be pointing up,” Anakin noted.

“Well, then that’s where I’m going,” Tahiri said with a grin. She began to climb the stone wall. Her small feet wedged carefully between the stones and her hands gripped tiny bumps on the rock.

“Tahiri, be careful,” Anakin called to his friend.

Tahiri had climbed halfway up the strange stone wall and now stood two meters off the ground.

STAR WARS: The Golden Globe

“There’s got to be some sort of secret button that will open this wall,” Tahiri said. Her hands flew around the corners of the stone blocks. She didn’t feel anything, so she moved higher. Tahiri was still following the brown arrows. Only now the arrows had grown larger and were much easier to see.

“It can’t be this simple,” Anakin called to his friend. “If the secret to opening the wall was arrows and a hidden button then anyone could find it. This wall has been standing for thousands of years. The secret just can’t be that easy.”

“Maybe we’re really smart,” Tahiri called down to her friend.

“Tahiri, you should come back down,” Anakin instructed. “We need to think this through. Those voices that told us to go back or fear for our lives? Maybe they meant that if we do something wrong down here we could be in danger. Anyway, we aren’t using the strength of your muscles.” our minds to figure out the puzzle. You’re just using the strength of your muscles.”

Tahiri grunted in response. She was almost to the top of the wall. Her hands ran along a stone block. There was something there. It felt like a smooth button.

“Anakin! I think I’ve found the secret button!” she called.

Anakin was overcome by an immediate sense of dread, so strong that he could almost taste it.

“Don’t do anything!” Anakin screamed to his friend.

But it was too late. Tahiri pushed the smooth button. It made a soft popping sound, but nothing happened. Tahiri pushed the button again, this time harder. A loud rumbling began.

“Hey, it worked!” Tahiri called down. “Do you hear that, Anakin?”

Something is happening. Maybe a hidden door is about to open,” Tahiri suggested breathlessly. Anakin’s neck was bent back so far that he felt it might break. He stood staring up at his friend. When he heard the rumbling sound he knew something wasn’t right. No doorway was opening. Anakin looked above Tahiri’s head. A big block of stone had come loose. If his friend didn’t move quickly the stone would drop from the roof and

Nancy Richardson

crush her! There was no time to shout a warning. Anakin closed his eyes and concentrated on pushing the stone to the side. A thunderous crash jolted Anakin's eyes open.

He turned to see that the stone block had landed centimeters from his left foot. It had missed them both. Tahiri was scrambling down the wall toward him.

"Anakin, that rock would have crushed me if you hadn't moved it!" Tahiri cried.

"We had better think things through before we push any more secret buttons," Anakin said gruffly. Tahiri nodded.

"Okay, so now we know that there are traps built into the wall," Anakin said.

"And we know that a wrong move could hurt us," Tahiri added. "We also know that it is impossible to move the biggest stones with our minds. The only thing I've been able to move is all this glittery gold stuff," Tahiri said as she brushed off her jumpsuit. It was covered in golden dust.

"You look like a magic fairy," Anakin laughed. Even Tahiri's eyelashes were glittering with dust.

"Watch it or I'll cover you with this stuff," Tahiri giggled back. Just to prove her point, she ran her hands along the wall to pick up glitter and then shook them over Anakin's head. His hair sparkled.

"Very funny," Anakin said as he tried to shake the glitter off.

"Hey, Tahiri, what if this glittery gold stuff really is magic?" Anakin asked.

Tahiri made a face at her friend. "Next thing you're going to say is that the glitter is the way we will unlock the wall," she added with a laugh.

"I think it is, Tahiri. This golden stuff is the only thing we've been able to move. Let's try rubbing it along the stones to see if we can highlight any cracks or pathways that we haven't seen."

"It's worth a try," Tahiri agreed.

Anakin moved to the far left wall and began to rub the golden glitter along the stones. In most spots it rained down to the floor

STAR WARS: The Golden Globe

and formed piles of gold. Tahiri had begun to rub the glitter along the same wall from the other end.

"It's not showing us anything," she grumbled.

"Keep trying," Anakin said. As he reached the center of the wall, Anakin began to notice that a thin line of gold was sticking to some of the stones. He bent down and continued to rub the glitter on them.

Tahiri had almost reached the spot where he was rubbing. She crouched by the bottom stone.

"So the glitter sticks in some spots," Tahiri began. "But I don't see a doorway."

Anakin moved back and looked at the lines where the golden dust had stuck.

"Tahiri," he said in an awed voice, "step back and look."

Tahiri moved away from the wall.

"Holy bantha!" she cried. "Anakin, it's the outline of a child!"

Anakin nodded at his friend. Before them a single golden line traced the form of a child on the stone wall. Tahiri raced forward and tried to push the outline in. The stone wall didn't move.

"How do we open it?" Tahiri asked in a desperate voice.

"Look, Tahiri," Anakin replied. "To the right of the figure is another outline-it looks like a handprint, doesn't it? Maybe that's what triggers the secret door."

Tahiri moved to the golden hand and gently placed her own palm over the print. Nothing happened. "You try, Anakin," Tahiri whispered.

Anakin stepped forward and placed his palm on the golden print. Again nothing happened.

"What do we do now?" Tahiri asked her friend. "We seemed so close to unlocking the wall...." Tahiri's voice trailed off as she watched her friend race toward the stone stairway.

"Where are you going?" Tahiri cried.

"I'll be right back," Anakin called. Moments later Anakin returned to the room with the small bone Tahiri had discovered

Nancy Richardson

on the stairway. “Maybe our hands aren’t exactly the right shape,” Anakin offered in a breathless voice.

Tahiri nodded in excitement. Anakin walked toward the golden figure, the Massassi child’s hand stretched out before him. He placed the skeletal fingers against the wall, and they clicked dully against the stones. Then, as the fingertips of the bony hand touched the golden print, they began to disappear. Anakin kept pushing until the entire hand had vanished inside the wall.

“It fits,” Tahiri yelled. With a loud click and a gentle hiss of air, the door swung open. A golden light flooded the room. It was much brighter than the glitter. Anakin and Tahiri moved forward, holding hands as they walked inside the secret room.

Chapter Thirteen

A gigantic crystal globe was in the center of the chamber. It reached to... the whole room. The globe was filled with swirls of golden glitter. It looks like a sparkling dust storm on Tatooine, Tahiri thought. She moved to touch the globe. Before Anakin could warn her to be careful she was tossed back into the stone wall. Anakin raced over to his friend.

"I'm okay," she said as she rose to her feet. "Guess there's some kind of force field around that thing. Oh no, what's this creature?" Tahiri cried, jumping backward.

Anakin peered over to the spot where his friend had fallen. Curled up - at the base of a stone block was a small creature. He hadn't seen it at first because its fur was the exact brown and golden color of the stone wall. It seemed to be sleeping. Its closed eyes were large and so round that the lids stuck out several centimeters. The creature's body was about one meter long and its floppy ears draped down to the stone floor. Anakin bent to touch the being's fur. It stuck straight out but was surprisingly soft.

"Anakin, I think it's waking up," Tahiri warned. Anakin backed away. The creature opened one large eye, which was at once a swirl of brown, green, and blue. It studied the two friends. "Do you think it's dangerous?" Tahiri whispered.

Nancy Richardson

Anakin shrugged. He wasn't sure. Then the being stretched and yawned.

"He doesn't seem too worried about us," Anakin said.

"Ikrit, Ikrit, Ikrit!" the creature sat up and whistled in a high-pitched voice. Anakin raised his eyebrows questioningly.

"Ikrit, Ikrit, Ikrit!" the creature whistled again. Then it curled up its small hands and pounded its chest. "Ikrit, Ikrit, Ikrit!"

"I think it's trying to tell us its name is Ikrit," Tahiri said with a giggle. "Okay, so your name is Ikrit. Pleased to meet you. I'm Tahiri and this is Anakin Solo," she said in a polite voice. It was really kind of cute, she thought.

Ikrit stared right at her with its large round eyes. Now they were pure green, just like her own. For a second she could have sworn it winked at her! Then Ikrit rose and scurried on all fours around the golden globe. It looked like it was checking to make sure the globe was all right. It sat down in front of Anakin when - it was done. Then its fur changed color. It was now frost white. Anakin turned back to the globe.

What was it? And why did he feel so sad when he looked at it? Anakin closed his eyes and tried to use the Force to understand the golden globe. For a moment he thought he heard whispers. His eyes flew open. Maybe he and Tahiri were not alone. But no one else was in the room except the creature Ikrit. Anakin closed his eyes again. This time he was sure he heard whispers. The whispers and cries of children. He turned to Tahiri to tell her. She looked frightened.

"Anakin, I know this is going to sound crazy," Tahiri whispered, "but I think I saw a hand pressed against the inside of the globe."

Anakin turned back to the globe and peered into the golden light. He could not see anything.

"And that's not all I have to tell you," Tahiri said in a small voice.

Anakin turned to face his friend.

"The hand was a child's."

STAR WARS: The Golden Globe

Anakin whirled back to the globe. He still couldn't see anything.

"Tahiri, I can't see anything, but I believe you. Something is inside that globe. When I close my eyes and reach, out to it with the Force I can hear children whispering and crying," Anakin said.

Tahiri looked at her friend in horror. She wanted to break the globe open and free whoever was inside of it. But neither of them could touch the globe without being thrown back by its powerful force field.

Ikrit began to leap and jump in the air.

"What's it doing?" Tahiri asked.

"I think it's just playing," Anakin said. Ikrit leapt onto Anakin's shoulder and covered the boy's eyes.

"Hey, quit it," he said.

But Ikrit wouldn't get down from his shoulders. It yanked at Anakin's hair and tweaked his nose. Anakin reached up to pull the creature down. His wrist - chronometer flashed in the golden light. Ikrit turned Anakin's wrist so that he could play with the instrument.

"He must like how it flashes in the light," Tahiri said.

"Oh, my gosh!" Anakin cried when he saw the time flashing. "We've been here for six hours! Everyone at the academy must be out looking for us. We've got to get out of here. If they find us in this secret room, everything will be lost."

"What will be lost?" Tahiri asked. "And how do you know?"

"It's just a feeling, a terrible feeling that if we are discovered here we will fail in whatever we are meant to do. And we will fail more beings than just ourselves," Anakin replied. "It's that feeling of dread, and the voice inside my head."

"What does the voice say?" Tahiri questioned.

"It says get out of here now!" Anakin cried.

The two friends raced out of the room, with Ikrit at their heels. Tahiri and Anakin charged up the stone stairway. It was

Nancy Richardson

easier this time; they were covered with enough golden glitter to light their way.

Ikrit followed behind them, and every few minutes he whistled, “Ikrit, Ikrit, Ikrit.”

“We know your name already,” Anakin grumbled at the creature. Its large eyes, now the same ice blue as Anakin’s, stared at the boy.

“Ikrit, Ikrit, Ikrit,” it whistled again. But this time Anakin felt like the creature was laughing at him. On their way up the stairs Tahiri stopped to replace the old bone she had found. She held it up. Its shiny white surface was lit by golden light. It’s almost beautiful in a sad way, Tahiri thought. Anakin put his hand on her shoulder.

“We’ve got to get out of here,” he said softly. Tahiri put the bone down gently, and they began to once again race up the stairs. It hadn’t seemed such a long way down, Anakin thought as he struggled to catch his breath. The creature Ikrit didn’t even look winded.

Strange, Anakin thought. That thing had been locked up inside the room with the golden globe. Who knows how long Ikrit had been sleeping there-a year? A thousand years? Had it eaten in all that time? Now it was racing up the steps with them. And it didn’t even look tired!

Anakin heard ArtooDetoo bleeping before he saw him through the hole in the wall. He wondered if the droid had been calling to them the whole time. For a moment he felt guilty. After all, it was Artoo who had discovered the hole in the wall. saved them from drowning in the river. And it was Artoo who had discovered the hole in the wall. Maybe I’ve been too hard on the droid, Anakin thought. As Anakin climbed through the He wondered if the droid had been calling to them the whole time.

For a moment he felt guilty. After all, it was Artoo who had saved them from drowning in the river. And it was Artoo who had discovered the hole in the wall. Maybe I’ve been too hard on the droid, Anakin thought. As Anakin climbed through the hole

STAR WARS: The Golden Globe

he softly whispered an apology to the droid. For a moment Artoo was silent. But when the droid saw Ikrit bounce through the wall he immediately began his beeping and blipping.

“Ikrit, Ikrit, Ikrit,” the creature whistled. Ikrit jumped onto the rounded top of the droid. Artoo whirled in circles, trying to throw Ikrit off. But Ikrit remained calmly seated on the droid. Tahiri, Anakin, and Artoo, with Ikrit still sitting on Artoo’s head, raced toward the front hallway of the palace. Anakin heaved open the door and they stepped out into the jungle.

It was still raining softly. But the storm had ended. The winds had stopped tearing through the jungle, and the night sky was almost clear enough to allow the stars to be seen. Anakin turned to have one last look at the Palace of the Woolamander. He stared at the dark letters carved above the doorway.

“I wish I knew what those letters meant,” Anakin whispered to himself. Maybe, he thought, they had something to do with the golden globe.

“Stop staring at those symbols,” Tahiri said to her friend as she tugged on his arm. “We will never have the chance to find out what they mean if we don’t get back to the academy.”

“What’s the rush,” Anakin said. “Chances are pretty good that they’re going to be really upset we’ve been gone so long.”

Tahiri scowled at her friend. “We should at least try,” she scolded.

Chapter Fourteen

Quickly Anakin, Tahiri, Artoo, and Ikrit walked back into the jungle. The rain had soon soaked them. Puddles of glittering gold water pooled at Anakin's and Tahiri's feet. The rain was washing all the gold off their hair and jumpsuits. Neither of the friends noticed. It was dark, and they wondered if they would be able to find their way back to the Great Temple through the jungle now that they had lost their raft.

"Ikrit, Ikrit, Ikrit" the strange white creature whistled. Anakin turned and saw that Artoo was stuck in a large hole.

"Must be a runyip hole," Anakin grumbled as he and Tahiri struggled to lift the droid.

"What are runyips?" Tahiri asked as she pushed a wet strand of blonde hair from her face.

"My brother Jacen told me about them. They're jungle animals," Anakin explained. "They have claws on their toes that they use to dig for food. A runyip must have dug this large hole to hide from the storm."

At that very moment a shaggy creature with brown and green fur stuck its long nose out of the hole. Artoo bleeped in surprise. Tahiri leapt backward.

"They only eat plants," Anakin laughed. The runyip popped out of the hole and darted into the jungle. Anakin watched its

STAR WARS: The Golden Globe

white - spotted tail bounce into the distance. Then he turned back to the droid and helped lift him out of the hole.

"Which way should we go?" Anakin asked his friend.

Tahiri shook her head. "Well, I guess we should head this way,"

Anakin said as he pointed into the jungle. "I'm not sure it's the right way back to the academy, but it's better than just standing here."

"Ikrit, Ikrit, Ikrit," the furry animal on Artoo's head whistled.

"That's a lot of help," Tahiri muttered.

Artoo began to beep-beep repeatedly. Then he rolled away from the group.

"Artoo is saying no," Anakin said as he stopped in his tracks. "We must be heading the wrong way-let's follow the droid."

Tahiri nodded. Tahiri and Anakin began to follow Artoo. For several minutes Tahiri was silent. This was a rare occurrence, but Tahiri was thinking. How were they going to persuade Luke Skywalker not to kick them out of the academy? They had broken one of Luke's rules. Tahiri wondered if she should take the blame for Anakin. She couldn't stand the idea that he might get kicked out. It was vitally important for him to become a Jedi. Anakin's whole family was strong in the Force. He was meant to be a Jedi. If he was returned home he would be so ashamed, she said to herself. And worst of all, he would never have the chance to complete the important task that had drawn both of them to raft the river of Yavin 4.

If Tahiri was sent back to Tatooine no one would really care, she reflected sadly. The Sand People would just take her back. It didn't matter to them whether she was a Jedi or not. They only cared about searching for water and other treasures. She was just another worker to them. That thought made Tahiri a little sad. She wished that she had a family. People that worried about her. People who cared what happened to her.

"Anakin," Tahiri began in a firm voice. "I'm going to take the blame for you."

Nancy Richardson

Anakin stopped in his tracks and stared at his friend. “How can you even think I’d let you do that, Tahiri?”

“Listen to me,” Tahiri said, staring up into Anakin’s eyes. “I don’t have any family. No one cares if I get sent back home. But there are a lot of people counting on you to be a great Jedi Knight like your uncle. Don’t you see, I didn’t even know what a Jedi was a few weeks ago. It doesn’t matter if I’m returned to Tatooine. I don’t have a destiny to fulfill.”

“What you’re saying isn’t true,” Anakin interrupted her. “It’s true that I would be ashamed if I was sent back home, but we don’t know for sure that that will happen. I believe in my heart that I’m meant to be a Jedi Knight. But so are you. Tionne and Uncle Luke wouldn’t have brought you to Yavin 4 if you weren’t strong in the Force. And even if you aren’t that important to the Sand People, you’re important to me. I’m your family now. I care about what happens to you. And there is no way I would let you take the blame for what we did together. We’re a team.”

Tahiri smiled. Then the two friends turned to follow Artoo through the jungle. Neither knew at that moment for sure whether they were headed toward or away from the academy. Giant Massassi trees surrounded them. They could see woolamanders and runyips darting through the jungle. They were unsure if they were lost, but Artoo kept rolling forward, Ikrit still perched on his dome.

“He seems to know where he’s going,” Tahiri said. Anakin shrugged. He hoped Tahiri was right. They had been walking in the jungle for an hour. It was past midnight.

“We just can’t get kicked out of the academy,” Tahiri said to her friend as they walked beneath the giant Massassi trees. “If that happens we will never get to return to the palace. And we’ll never learn about the golden globe. Something is very wrong inside that globe, Anakin,” Tahiri said softly. “And we’ve got to figure out what it is.”

Anakin was quiet.

STAR WARS: The Golden Globe

"I don't mean to interrupt your thoughts, Anakin," Tahiri said a bit sarcastically, "but just in case we are actually close to the academy, I think we should figure out just what we are going to tell your Uncle Luke."

"If we tell him the truth, we'll be in big trouble," Anakin said.

"Those aren't the same words you used in the palace," Tahiri countered thoughtfully. "When I asked you what would happen if we were discovered near the golden globe, you said that a feeling of dread and the voice inside your head had told you that 'everything will be lost.' What exactly does that mean?" Tahiri asked.

"I think it means that we have to keep the golden globe a secret or whatever we saw inside of it will be destroyed," Anakin explained.

"Okay, let's tell Luke that we went for a walk and got lost," Tahiri suggested.

It wasn't a great excuse, but it was true—they had gotten lost trying to return to the Great Temple. In the end, they'd still broken one of Luke's rules, but it wouldn't be as bad as telling him they'd gone into an old palace. The old palaces were falling apart; Luke would be angry that she and Anakin had gone into one. And he might also ask what was inside the palace. Given Anakin's strong feelings and the voice in his head, it didn't seem wise to tell Luke everything they had seen. Anakin agreed they should use Tahiri's excuse. It was the only way to follow the warnings in his head and heart without directly lying. But Anakin knew that if Luke asked him for the whole truth, he would have to give it—regardless of the outcome. He simply couldn't lie to his uncle. The group reached a narrow wooden bridge that crossed the river. On the other side loomed the Great Temple.

"Wish I'd known about this bridge before I got into that raft and almost drowned," Tahiri grumbled. "Either way, I guess we're home," she said in a soft, scared voice.

Slowly Tahiri, Anakin, and Artoo crossed the bridge. Ikrit had disappeared.

Nancy Richardson

“Look who is waiting by the door,” Anakin warned.

Chapter Fifteen

Luke Skywalker's black jumpsuit had faded into the night, but his face was easy to see. It was a tired and unhappy face. And it wore a scowl. Anakin, Tahiri, and Artoo moved toward the Jedi Knight.

"Where have you been?" Luke Skywalker asked Anakin and Tahiri in a stern voice. He had been waiting on the front steps of the Great Temple for his students to return.

"We have been searching the academy and the jungle for both of you. You are in deep trouble." Anakin bowed his head. He was afraid that he was about to be kicked out of the academy for breaking one of Luke's rules. If that happened, he knew, he and Tahiri would never be able to return to the golden globe.

"We went for a walk and then the storm came up and we got lost." Anakin heard Tahiri say.

"You got lost?" Luke repeated in disbelief. Artoo beeped softly. Luke stared at the droid. "Artoo, you're telling me that you had to guide these students back to the academy?"

Anakin and Tahiri looked at each other in surprise. Artoo was helping them! Tahiri met Luke's eyes with her large green ones.

"Yes, we got lost. We were so frightened," she said. Tahiri looked like she was going to cry.

Nancy Richardson

Luke shook his head. "I'm sorry that you were lost, but there is no excuse for sneaking out of the academy. I should punish you both," Luke said sadly.

"Please give us another chance, Uncle Luke," Anakin begged. "We will never sneak away again," he promised.

"Please, Master Luke, don't punish Anakin. It was all my fault," Tahiri cried. Tahiri ignored Anakin's look of confusion and kept talking. "I just had to go out to see the jungle. I've never seen a jungle before. I've never seen so much water. I talked Anakin into coming with me because I was afraid to go there alone."

Luke looked at the young girl. He could understand her desire to see the jungle—he had grown up on the desert planet of Tatooine, too. But that was still no excuse.

"Uncle Luke, it's my fault, too," Anakin said softly. His eyes met Luke's. "I chose to go with Tahiri. I'm responsible for my choices."

Tahiri couldn't help letting a small smile cross her lips. Anakin had finally said he was responsible for his choices. It wasn't that she was happy that he was sharing the blame; she'd expected Anakin to do that. It was that he had taken a step toward understanding that he had the power to make his own choices. That meant he had the power to choose to use the Force for good. Anakin didn't have to be like his grandfather Darth Vader if he didn't choose to be.

Luke turned toward Tahiri. He had seen her smile. Luke was surprised to see that the young girl also understood that Anakin had difficulty recognizing that he could make his own choices.

Luke, Leia, and Han had known for some time that the boy believed he might turn out to be like his grandfather. Perhaps, Luke thought, Leia shouldn't have named her son Anakin. After all, Anakin Skywalker was a difficult man to come to understand. This had been true even for Luke. So much wisdom in a child so young, Luke thought as he stared at Tahiri.

STAR WARS: The Golden Globe

The girl was a mess. Her hair was full of leaves and small twigs. Her orange jumpsuit was soaked through. And her bare feet were covered with mud. But so much wisdom, Luke thought in amazement. Luke Skywalker closed his eyes. He knew in his heart that Anakin Solo was meant to be a powerful Jedi. He would serve the light side of the Force well, once he understood completely that Darth Vader's choices had nothing to do with his own.

And the younger one, Tahiri, continued to surprise Luke. On Tatooine he had thought she was strong in the Force. But he had not imagined the extent of the strength and power that lay deep within her. There was also a strange connection between the two students. Alone they were powerful. But together they could make a stronger unit than many adult Jedi teams. Luke felt that Tahiri and Anakin were meant to train together, that perhaps in the future they would serve the Force as a team. Luke Skywalker opened his eyes and stared at his students. He could not end their chance to become Jedi because of one foolish action.

"This can never happen again," he warned them. "Now go to your rooms and sleep. We will discuss this further tomorrow."

Anakin, Tahiri, and Artoo moved slowly into the Temple.

"Where's Ikrit?" Tahiri whispered to her friend. "I don't know. I guess he ran off into the jungle," Anakin whispered back.

That night Anakin couldn't sleep. What did all of it mean? he wondered. What was he and Tahiri's destiny? How could they figure out the secret of the golden globe? And what was that strange voice that spoke sometimes in his head? Why did it tell him that he couldn't share his secrets with Uncle Luke? Anakin's thoughts were interrupted by a scratching at the stones of his window. He turned and saw Ikrit.

"Hey, friend, how'd you find me?" Anakin asked the little white creature as he motioned it inside his room. Ikrit leapt onto his bed and began to snuggle under the covers. "Hey, that's not

Nancy Richardson

your bed,” Anakin said to the creature. “If you want to stay that’s fine, but not in my bed!”

Ikrit snuggled down farther, its large floppy ears resting on Anakin’s pillow.

“Great, just great,” Anakin muttered. “Now I’ve lost my bed to a furry jungle creature.”

“Watch who you call a jungle creature,” a scratchy voice said. It was the same strange voice that Anakin had been hearing in his head. Only this time it came from the being in his bed.

Chapter Sixteen

“You spoke!” Anakin said in surprise.

“I thought you wanted to know where the strange voice in your head was coming from,” Ikrit replied, its blue eyes boring into Anakin’s. “Well, here it is.”

Anakin moved over to the edge of his bed and sat down. Tahiri is never going to believe this, he thought.

“Yes she will,” Ikrit replied.

“You read my thoughts,” Anakin cried.

“Right again,” Ikrit said with a snickering laugh.

“Who are you, and why have you been talking to me inside my head?” Anakin demanded. “And why were you sleeping by the golden globe? Do you know what the globe is?”

“If you stop asking questions I will tell you everything I know,” Ikrit replied.

Anakin fell silent.

“My name is Ikrit. I am an ancient Jedi Master. I came to Yavin 4 four hundred years ago to study the ruins of the Massassi temples. I discovered the golden globe. There is a curse that surrounds the globe. A curse that I cannot break. So I curled up at the base of the globe to wait for the people who *could* break it. Those people are you and your friend Tahiri.” Ikrit stopped speaking and snuggled beneath the covers of Anakin’s bed.

Nancy Richardson

It seemed that he was done talking.

"I have a lot of questions," Anakin said slowly.

"Then ask them," Ikrit replied.

"Why Tahiri and me?" Anakin began.

"Because you are the ones who can break the curse. That is why I brought you to the Palace of the Woolamander. And I was right about you both, because together your strength in the Force allowed you to unlock the door that led to the golden globe," Ikrit replied.

"What is the globe?" Anakin asked. "I cannot tell you that, for I do not know for certain-although I have my ideas. I can only say that the spirits of thousands depend on your finding the answer to that question," Ikrit answered. "And I only know that because I feel it, deep within my old bones."

"But what about the curse, then? What exactly is it?" Anakin asked.

Ikrit shook his head again. "I do not know or I would have tried to break it. That is a question you must answer for yourself."

"Why can't I ask my uncle Luke for help? After all, he's a Jedi Master," Anakin said.

"He is an adult. An adult cannot break the curse or I would have done it myself," Ikrit said with a scowl. "If you tell Luke Skywalker, the golden globe will explode into a million pieces of crystal and everything will be lost," Ikrit warned. "I know this, too, only from a feeling. A deep, terrible, unmistakable feeling of dread."

"*What* will be lost?" Anakin cried..

"You know the answer to that," the Jedi Master said softly.

"The children Tahiri and I saw and heard inside the globe," Anakin whispered. "The children will be lost. But what children? Who are they, and how can Tahiri and I possibly save them?"

Ikrit shook his head. "I grow impatient with you, young Anakin. I would not have led you and Tahiri to the Palace of the Woolamander if you did not have the power to understand and

STAR WARS: The Golden Globe

break the curse. That means you also have the power to save the children. The only question I have for you is this: Will you answer the call? Will you attempt to break the curse and save the children?"

Anakin met Ikrit's large eyes. He knew that he had to talk to Tahiri about this. He had to tell her everything Ikrit had said to him. They would make this decision together-as a team. But Anakin already knew what that decision would be: He and Tahiri would help. What else could they do? He knew that it would take all of their combined strength and the power of the Force to solve the mystery of the golden globe and save those trapped inside its crystal.

Anakin heard Luke Skywalker's words from that first school assembly.

"The Jedi Code: A Jedi's promise must be the most serious, the deepest of his or her life. A Jedi seeks not adventure or excitement, for a Jedi is passive, calm, and at peace. A Jedi knows that anger, fear, and aggression lead to the dark side. A Jedi uses the Force for knowledge and defense, never for attack. There is no 'try,' only 'do.' Believe and you succeed. Above all else, know that control of the Force comes only from concentration and training."

Yes, there could be no other decision but to work as a team with Tahiri and break the curse, Anakin thought.

"Then may the Force be with you and Tahiri, young Anakin," Ikrit said softly. "For you have chosen a difficult path."

Book Two
Lyric's World

PROLOGUE

The purella skittered along the purple rocks that lined a cavern deep within the Sistra mountain. It was almost time again. She knew by the tugging in her ruby red underbelly and the thick strings of yellowed saliva that hung from the four barbed pincers lining her mouth.

Every year at the same time they gathered in the cove for the changing. And every year she found them. It was strange, this hunger she felt for the Melodies, satisfied by gorging on just one of the beings each season. Last year she had pulled a Melodie from the shallow waters, having learned that she could stretch several of her legs far enough to grasp one without falling into the blue-green brine. She did not like water. That was why she never tried to capture an elder. They swam too deep for her. But it didn't matter whether she snared a changeling pulled from the shallow waters, or a being who ringed the cove to protect the others. They all tasted the same.

The purella stopped before a meter-wide crack in the side of the cavern. This would be the place for her web. It was important to have a hidden den, just in case they followed her. And although her eight legs made her roughly two meters wide, her actual body was a bright red bristled mass measuring only one. She could easily fit through the crack. Slowly she crawled up

Nancy Richardson

the rocks and sidestepped through the crevice. It was narrow only for a moment, then widened into a darkly lit cave. Her glowing orange eyes surveyed the area. Yes, she thought, this was perfect.

She began to spin her web. Black, sticky, and thick as a rope, it fell in lines behind her as she crisscrossed the cave. As she worked, she thought about the hunt—thought about the Melodie that would soon lie writhing in her gummy snare. The being would not be able to escape, and the more it struggled the more the web would bind, until there would be no movement but the terrified rolling of the Melodie's yellow eyes. That was the moment the purella loved best. When all movement ceased and she was certain of her victory. Certain that the prey could be devoured at her leisure. Yes, she thought happily as she spun, that was the moment she loved best.

Chapter One

Anakin Skywalker studied the girl in the front row of the Grand Audience Chamber. She sat alone on one of the stone seats that circled the stage. She was a small girl, and he guessed she was about eleven years old. Her long hair cascaded down to her waist in thick red ringlets, and her eyes were a pale yellow color. Anakin had never seen the girl sit with any other candidates. Maybe she was a loner just like he was.

He knew what it felt like to be alone. Anakin had a brother and sister, twins named Jacen and Jaina, and parents, Leia Organa Solo and Han Solo. They all loved him very much, but ever since Anakin could remember, he'd been a loner. Even now that he was a candidate at Luke Skywalker's Jedi academy, surrounded by Jedi students from across the galaxy, he spent a great deal of time alone. It wasn't that he always wanted it that way, it was just that there was so much to think about.

Studying to become a Jedi Knight took peace and quiet, something that his new friend, a student at the academy named Tahiri, didn't seem to understand. Only a week before, Tahiri and Anakin had almost been kicked out of the Jedi academy. They'd snuck away from the academy to raft the river that wound its way through the lush jungles of the moon, Yavin 4. A violent storm had struck. Anakin remembered the broiling green

Nancy Richardson

of the river crashing against his body as he and Tahiri shot through the water in a sleek silver raft.

His heart skipped a beat as he recalled the look of panic that contorted Tahiri's face when she was thrown from their raft and had to struggle to survive in the cold waters. Without the help of the droid, Artoo-Detoo, he might not have been able to save his friend. If that had happened, he and Tahiri wouldn't have uncovered the evil that lay hidden on Yavin 4 in an ancient palace. An evil that they were now both pledged to destroy.

Anakin heard Tahiri's bare feet padding along the gray stone floor before he saw her. Tahiri was from Tatooine, a desert planet with two scorching suns. Ever since she'd arrived at the academy she'd refused to wear shoes. After living on a hot world filled with gritty sand, Tahiri loved to feel the cool stones of the Great Temple beneath her feet. Anakin's only friend at the academy slid into the seat beside him. She pushed her long blonde hair behind her ears and fixed him with large, green eyes. Anakin could sense Tahiri's impatience.

He knew that she wanted to talk. But Anakin wasn't ready to talk about the evil they'd discovered deep in the jungles of Yavin 4. And he didn't want to discuss the strange creature that had visited his room in the middle of the night. A creature named Ikrit that he'd learned was an ancient JediMaster. A Master who had drawn both him and Tahiri into the jungles to discover a giant golden globe hidden deep within the crumbling ruins of the Palace of the Woolamander.

A crystal sphere created by an evil curse, locked with a riddle, and filled with glittering golden sands and the cries of children trapped within its spell. Before Anakin could turn to Tahiri to tell her he wasn't ready to talk, Luke Skywalker entered the chamber. Anakin was always amazed by the reaction he felt when his uncle Luke came into a room. The Jedi Master's presence seemed to wash a sense of calm over all of the candidates. Human children and aliens alike stopped shuffling feet, picking through matted black fur, flapping wings.

STAR WARS: Lyric's World

"May the Force be with you," Luke Skywalker said as his pale blue eyes, almost the same color as his nephew Anakin's, scanned the room. "Today we will begin to learn how to use the Force to travel in our minds to places we have been, but cannot completely remember. In the time you have already spent at the academy, you've learned that training to become a Jedi cannot be taught with words, only with experience. So I won't tell you how to recapture your lost memories. I will say only this: Believe and you succeed. That is part of the Jedi Code, and you must truly accept it if you are to triumph. Are there any questions?"

"What if we fail?" a large, blue-skinned, birdlike alien named Chitter squawked.

Luke Skywalker met Chitter's concerned, beady black eyes with a patient gaze.

"Asking the question means that you have already accepted that possibility," he said softly. "Remember, there is no try, only do, for a Jedi. In trying there is success, regardless of the outcome."

Luke Skywalker stepped down from the stone stage and quietly left the chamber. The Jedi Knight Tionne, a humanoid woman with silvery hair and mother-of-pearl eyes, walked to the front of the room.

"Please choose partners," Tionne said to the Jedi candidates.

Anakin watched as all of the candidates paired with each other. He and Tahiri were partners. Out of the corner of his eye he saw that the girl in the front of the chamber still sat alone.

"Today we are going to learn how to use the Force to travel in our minds to events and places we've experienced before but have difficulty recalling," Tionne began. "Part of working with the Force is developing the strength of your minds. All of you have heard stories from your childhood of places you've visited and events that took place. But sometimes it's hard to remember things that happened long ago. By using the Force you can reach into the darkest corners of your mind and find memories you

Nancy Richardson

can't quite grasp or never knew you had. Work together - this will be a difficult task for most of you."

Anakin turned toward Tahiri, then turned back to look at the red-haired girl. He knew how she must be feeling. He remembered all the times on his home planet, Coruscant, when his older brother and sister had run off to play and left him alone. Quickly he slid off his seat and walked down the aisle to the girl. She was staring at the ground. Slowly she raised her yellow eyes to meet Anakin's blue ones.

"Come join my friend and me," Anakin beckoned.

The girl quietly stood and followed Anakin back to his seat. She sat down next to Tahiri.

"My name is Lyric," the red-haired girl sang out in a voice that sounded like the bubbling of water over the smooth stones of a stream.

"I'm Tahiri, and this is Anakin," Tahiri began chattering. "It's strange that I haven't talked to you before now-I mean, I've talked to just about everyone here.... Come to think of it, I tried to speak to you the first day at the academy, after I learned that you'd been here longer than any of us, studying with another group of candidates. You were even shyer than Anakin," Tahiri said with a grin at her friend. "So, where are you from? What planet? You're humanoid, right? How old are you?"

"Tahiri," Anakin said sternly, "give her a chance to answer one question before you shoot another at her."

Still, he was pleased that his friend was being so nice to Lyric. Tahiri, too, understood what it was like to be lonely. She was an orphan. Her

parents had disappeared when she was three years old, and the Sand People of Tatooine had taken her into their tribe. They were a violent, nomadic race that wore strips of cloth over their entire bodies and dark goggles and breath masks that covered their faces. Tahiri had lived with them for six years. Six years without any contact with other human children.

STAR WARS: Lyric's World

Tahiri grimaced at Anakin's interruption, then turned back to Lyric.

"So, where are you from?" she asked with a grin. Lyric met Tahiri's eyes with her large yellow ones. "I am from the moon Yavin 8," she began. "I'm a Melodie."

Chapter Two

The Jedi Knight Tionne walked over to Tahiri, Anakin, and Lyric.

“How is your memory work going?” she asked. Tahiri frowned. She didn’t want to do the exercise right now. It was more interesting to learn about Lyric. She’d never met a Melodie before, and she wanted to know more about Yavin 8 and Lyric’s species. Tahiri sighed. The conversation would have to wait until later. She smiled at Pionne, then turned to Lyric.

“Why don’t you tell us a memory that you want to recall?” Tahiri said to the Melodie. Lyric shyly looked at Tahiri, her large yellow eyes earnest.

“Let me think for a moment,” she replied, and closed her eyes. While Anakin waited for Lyric’s memory, he began to doodle on a sheet of paper. He was drawing the strange symbols he and Tahiri had seen carved deep in the jungle, in the crumbling stones of the Palace of the Woolamander.

Symbols which were not only carved above the entrance to the palace, but deep within its base, down a dark spiral stairway, in the place where Anakin and Tahiri had discovered the mysterious golden globe. In that place, they could almost taste the evil of those who used the Force to serve the dark side. Anakin forgot about Lyric and Tahiri and closed his eyes, letting

himself drift back to the jungle-back one week, when he and Tahiri had rafted the river of Yavin 4 and raced through the rain-soaked jungle to find refuge from the howling winds.

Recalling places and memories, whether they were recent or far past, was a skill he 'd always had. At this very moment, Anakin could smell the dusky sweetness of the Massassi trees that lined the lush moon, could see their dark purplish bark. He could feel the cool soil of the jungle, wet from the storm that had threatened to capsize he and Tahiri's raft.

Anakin moved toward the place he and Tahiri had found to escape the storm, the Palace of the Woolamander, and stood beneath its entrance, staring up through the rain at the strange carvings in its crumbling stones. Then he moved inside the palace and down a dark corridor. He heard the skittering of hundreds of woolamanders as they raced away from his intrusion.

Anakin found the crumbling spiral stairway he and Tahiri had descended and slowly dropped into the depths of the palace, to the place where evil coated the stones and called out warnings in a voice laced with danger. When Anakin reached the base of the steps he stared at the symbols carved in the wall of the small room. Only a week before, he and Tahiri had used the Force to open a hidden passage and reveal the golden globe that had lain in secret for thousands of years. Tahiri had tried to touch the sphere, to break its smooth crystal surface, but a powerful field had thrown her into the stone wall. The globe was untouchable—at least until he and Tahiri could figure out what evil curse surrounded it.

Out of the corner of his eye, Anakin saw Ikrit, the furry white creature he and Tahiri had found sleeping at the base of the globe. He hadn't known then that Ikrit was an ancient Jedi Master who had drawn both him and Tahiri to the globe. Drawn them to break a curse he'd later told them only children, strong in the Force and trained to be Jedi Knights, could break. A curse

Nancy Richardson

that no one, not even Luke Skywalker, could know about or help them undo.

"Anakin's lost in thought as usual," Tahiri said, breaking his memory. Lyric smiled softly, then looked over at Anakin. He'd been drawing on a sheet of paper with his eyes closed. She glanced down at the sheet, then drew in her breath sharply.

"What's wrong, Lyric?" Tahiri asked.

The girl had gone from pale-skinned to white, and her hands had shot up, covering her eyes with fingers that were linked at their base with pink webs.

"Those symbols," Lyric began.

"What about them?" Anakin asked excitedly. "Have you ever seen them before?" Anakin was certain that understanding the symbols carved in the palace was the next step toward solving the riddle that locked the golden globe. "Do you know what they mean?" he asked Lyric.

"No!" Lyric cried.

"But you recognize them," Tahiri prodded. "You've seen them somewhere before!"

"Yes," Lyric said in a voice that had lost its bubbly quality and now came out in a plaintive gurgle.

"Is it that you can't remember, or that the memory is too frightening?" Anakin said gently. "That's what this exercise is about. We'll help you remember. Please try-it's important."

Lyric closed her eyes and didn't reply. Anakin could sense her torment.

"Do you at least remember where you saw the symbols?" Tahiri asked.

"I'd never been off my moon before I came to the academy," Lyric finally said. "It was on Yavin 8."

"Please tell us," Anakin said softly. "Please. It's important."

Lyric looked up and met Anakin's eyes. She steeled herself to remember. To conquer her fear and put into words an experience of terror that she'd blocked from her mind and never spoken of before.

"I saw those symbols in the purple granite of my mountain," Lyric began in a faltering voice. She paused, trying to calm herself and let the memory flood back in an icy cold wave. "They were carved beside the nest of a giant avril, and the last time my eyes fell upon their strange design, I was about to be ripped to shreds by the creature's razor-sharp beak."

"What do you mean, ripped to shreds?" Tahiri said with surprise.

"I mean eaten for dinner by a giant bird with a razor-sharp beak and twenty-centimeter talons," Lyric replied. "I was out gathering trico, a plant our young eat, in the tundra below the mountains... This will make no sense unless I tell you a bit about my people," Lyric said, interrupting her own story. "I'm from the species called Melodies. We live deep in the purple mountain named Sistra on the moon Yavin 8," Lyric explained. "Our elders, those who have undergone the changing ceremony, live in pools of crystal blue water that run through much of our city. The children, all those who have yet to change, live around the pools in the caves and caverns of the mountain. It is our job to care for each other, since the elders cannot leave the water, and to watch the eggs--"

"What eggs?" Tahiri interrupted.

"Melodies are humanoid," Lyric reminded Tahiri. "We hatch from eggs spawned by our females. The eggs are kept in a dry cavern within the mountain. When we hatch, we look like human infants. And those of us who haven't changed—who are awaiting our twentieth year, when we are taken to a shallow cove to begin our transformation—care for the young. Part of that care is to gather trico, which is made into a paste to feed our infants until they are old enough to eat the silver-backed fish that we catch in the pools within the mountain.

"When we leave the safety of our home to gather trico," Lyric said, "we travel in groups. Sometimes that isn't enough, though, and the avrils still attack."

"What exactly are avrils?" Anakin asked.

Nancy Richardson

“They’re enormous birds of prey with vibrant blue beaks and talons. Their bodies are about two meters long and covered with thick black feathers. When an avril’s wings are spread, the span can measure up to eight meters. They feed on raiths, giant black rodents with thick, hairless, green tails; reels, deadly snakes that kill their prey by squeezing the breath out of their bodies; and the purella, a bristle-haired red spider that traps its prey in a thick black web and slowly feeds on it. But their favorite food, by far, is young Melodies. That’s why we travel in groups, so that they’re less likely to attack. And so that if we come across any of the other predators on our planet, we can fight them together.”

Lyric was silent for a moment. She began to recall a memory she visited only in nightmares.

“Several years ago, I was gathering trico when we heard the shriek of an attacking avril,” Lyric said softly. “There were five of us, and we began to throw the rocks we carry for defense. I can remember the bird’s smell, even now. It was sour and dank, and the black feathers that covered its body furrowed as it attacked. We ran out of rocks before the creature tired. And moments later I felt sharp talons wrap around my body and I was airborne. There was nothing the other Melodies could do but fill their sacks with trico and return to the mountains without me. They were certain that I was dead and would soon be devoured by the avril.”

“Your friends just let the avril fly away with you?” Tahiri said in shock.

“Yes,” Lyric replied, her eyes wide with remembered terror. “There was nothing they could do.”

Chapter Three

“They didn’t abandon me,” Lyric hastened to say as she saw the identical looks of horror on the faces of her new friends. “One of the reasons the elders allowed me to come to the Jedi academy is because the children of my people do not know how to defend themselves well from predators, and the adults cannot leave the water to help us survive. It was the elders’ hope that I might learn to use the Force to help my people,” Lyric explained. “But I am getting ahead of my story. The avril who attacked my group and snatched me took me to her nest, a shallow hole in the mountains, high above my own home. I heard her young squawking for food as I was dropped before their unseeing newborn eyes in a nest of twigs and trico. As I lay on my back, I saw the same type of symbols as Anakin drew. I did not have long to wonder how or when the carvings had been made. But I could tell they were created from the hand of an intelligent being.

“The avril towered above me; I could see its black tongue lashing back and forth as it prepared to devour me, later to regurgitate me in the way these birds feed their young. I don’t know why I did it, but I began to squawk back at the creature. I tried to make my voice sound like the very same cries as the young that surrounded me. The avril began to hop madly. I could sense its confusion. Then, in a whirl of feathers, it flew off. I can

Nancy Richardson

only assume that I copied the cries of the creature's young so well that it thought I was one of them and went off to find more food. I scrambled down the rocky mountain, desperate to find my way back home. Several hours later, battered but alive, I entered the portal to my city."

Lyric paused and looked at Anakin and Tahiri.

"I wish I could tell you more about the symbols I saw, because it is obviously terribly important to both of you," she said sadly. "But all I can tell you is that they are much like the ones Anakin drew. That is all I know."

"Are there others on your moon who might know?" Anakin asked.

"Perhaps the old ones," Lyric replied. "But they no longer surface, so I have never spoken to them." Anakin and Tahiri both frowned. They desperately needed to figure out what the symbols carved above the palace meant if they had any hope of solving the riddle of the golden globe.

"Why do the elder Melodies live in water?" Tahiri asked.

"After the changing, our bodies can no longer survive outside the water. We develop gills and breathe by extracting oxygen from water. In addition, we can no longer walk on land because our legs fuse into a large webbed tail," Lyric said. "Most of the elders can surface for varying amounts of time, which they do to see their young and give us guidance. However, the very old cannot surface at all."

"Let me get this straight," Tahiri gasped. "You're telling us that you're going to turn into a fish?"

Anakin scowled at Tahiri. Sometimes she could be rude!

"Not exactly," Lyric said, laughing. "Our upper body remains about the same, but our ability to breathe, as well as the form of our lower body, changes."

"What is the changing like?" Anakin asked. He had sensed deep fear beneath Lyric's lighthearted laugh.

"Seldom do all of us survive," Lyric replied softly. "Very seldom. I leave tomorrow morning for Yavin... for my changing."

That is why I was at the academy before you arrived, Tahiri," Lyric explained. "My time to study the Force is limited."

When it was time for the candidates to leave the Grand Audience Chamber, Lyric hung back.

"Go ahead, I'll meet up with you later," she called to her new friends. They hesitated.

"Please go," Lyric said softly.

Anakin and Tahiri both saw that thick salty tears were on the brink of spilling from Lyric's eyes. They left the chamber and waited for their new friend in the corridor. The Jedi Knight Tionne walked over to Lyric and sat on a stone seat by her side.

"I don't want to go," Lyric cried to Tionne. "Tomorrow I'll be sent back to Yavin 8 when the supply shuttle leaves. I'll be taken to the cove where the others who were born at the same time as me will be waiting for the changing, just below the blue - green algae that covers the surface of the waters in the cove. And while I'm changing, I'll be defenseless,"

Lyric wailed. Tionne knew all too well what Lyric was going to face. She'd been to Yavin 8 during her search for Jedi candidates for the academy, and had witnessed a changing ceremony. Tionne recalled the explanation Lyric had given her months before, when she'd questioned why the Melodies had to partake in a ceremony set in such a dangerous place. The shallow algae-covered waters of the cove were the only place on the mountain where the changing could occur. Until the changing was complete, the young Melodies needed the blue - green algae that carpeted the waters and created oxygen through photosynthesis, to provide them with enough oxygen to breathe. Once their gill slits were completely formed, the Melodies would be able to extract oxygen from water without the help of the algae and could be moved to safety-to the deep pool of water within the mountain. Until that time, Melodie children did their best to protect the changelings. The children circled the shallow cove and sat on its banks with bags of rocks to fight off the

Nancy Richardson

purella, avrils, reels, and raiths that came to feed on the changing Melodies.

Those creatures seemed to instinctively know the right season to hunt for changelings, Tionne grimly recalled. Lyric had ringed the cove with the other children for many seasons of changing ceremonies. She knew all too well, Tionne thought, that though the children always fought without fear for their lives, some of the changelings as well as some of the children didn't survive the day.

"I don't want to go," Lyric said plaintively. "I want to stay at the academy."

Tionne studied the young Melodie. From what she'd seen, Lyric was more than ready for the changing. In the past few weeks, she'd noticed that the child had begun to have difficulty breathing, her breaths sometimes sounding like rattling, dry gasps.

"Lyric, do you remember when I fought by your side at the cove?" Tionne asked.

Lyric nodded. "You came in search of Jedi candidates, but it was the day of the changing, and you fought to help save those who would become elders," she whispered. "I remember an avril swooped over your head and tried to slash you with its sharp talons, and you didn't see the reel that slithered up behind you," Lyric said.

"You saw the thick violet snake moments before it wrapped me in its coils and began to hiss and squeeze," Tionne said softly. "I recall that you turned and, without thought, stared into its black eyes and began to hiss at the long creature. Lyric, your voice, the voice of rushing streams and tinkling water, became the snake's voice. Just as I was about to be crushed, the creature released me from its coils and slithered away. For that reason, I took you to study at the Jedi academy.

"You were strong in the Force, even then," Tionne said to her student. "You are even stronger now. But if you don't return to Yavin 8 and undergo the changing, you'll die. You knew that you

wouldn't have a lot of time at the academy," Tionne continued. "You said that you wanted to study here anyway, in the hopes that you could use your training to help your people when you returned to Yavin 8. If you want to help them, you must return. And you must survive."

Slowly Lyric turned and left the room. Tionne was right, she thought. The only way to help her people learn to fight and survive was to teach them what she had learned at the academy. To find other Melodies who were sensitive to the Force, and train them to use their voices and minds to fight the predators that fed on the Melodies' eggs and changelings.

Still, her sobs caught in her throat as she left the Grand Audience Chamber.

"Lyric," Tahiri called out. "We didn't mean to eavesdrop, but we were worried about you. How can we help?" she asked.

Lyric shook her head.

"You can't," she answered sadly. "This is something I have to do alone."

"Why?" Anakin asked suddenly. "Why can't Tahiri and I go with you to Yavin 8 and help you through the changing ceremony?"

"Your place is at the academy," Lyric murmured.

"Our place is with our friend," Tahiri replied.

Chapter Four

The battered supply ship, the *Lightning Rod*, slid silently through the morning sky. Its courier and message runner—a longhaired pilot named Peckhum—navigated the ship past Yavin’s moons. Old Peckhum would not only take Anakin, Tahiri, and Lyric to Yavin 8, but would accompany them throughout their journey. Lyric’s world was too dangerous a place for the children to be alone. Anakin and Tahiri sat side by side. Anakin stared out his window. As they passed Yavin 13, he found himself wondering about the moon. It was said to be inhabited by reptilian creatures called slith. He’d read that the slith were meat-eating creatures with enormous jaws lined with spiked teeth. Anakin shook off his thoughts and rose from his seat to check on Lyric, who was sitting up front with Old Peckhum.

Since they’d left the academy, she hadn’t spoken. And, while Anakin knew that she was relieved to have him and Tahiri with her, he could also sense her apprehension and fear. Persuading Luke Skywalker to allow them to accompany their friend to Yavin 8 had been difficult. Anakin thought about the conversation they’d had that morning with his uncle.

“She needs us!” Tahiri had cried. “Please let us go to Yavin 8 with Lyric. Anakin and I can help her survive her changing, I know we can! And Peckhum will be there to protect us.”

Luke Skywalker had been unmoved.

"I can't send students into a potentially hazardous situation," he had said.

"Uncle Luke, you're the one who said that we can't learn to become Jedi Knights by listening to words. Experience is the best teacher, right?" Anakin had asked innocently, his ice blue eyes meeting his uncle's pale ones. "Please let us help Lyric."

Finally, Luke Skywalker had agreed. Anakin stared out the window as the supply shuttle sped through the silent sky. He thought about that morning. As he'd packed his academy jumpsuit and some extra socks, Ikrit, the Jedi Master they'd found in the palace, had climbed through the open window of his room.

"Where are you going, young Anakin?" Ikrit had asked in his raspy voice.

Anakin had explained the situation.

"Are we wrong to leave now, when we haven't solved the riddle of the golden globe?" Anakin asked.

Ikrit had only replied, "You must go where you are needed. You must go where you are drawn."

Then the Master had swung off the window ledge and scampered down the pyramid-shaped stone wall of the Great Temple. Anakin hadn't expected him to be much help. Ikrit had already explained that if an adult Jedi Knight or Master tried to break the curse, the globe would shatter into a thousand pieces of crystal. Anakin understood that he and Tahiri were on their own. His thoughts were interrupted.

"Anakin, have you thought much about the globe?" Tahiri whispered. She didn't wait for an answer.

"I have. I don't know how, but we've got to understand what the symbols carved in the palace and in the mountain on Lyric's planet mean. It's the only way I can think to figure out how to break the curse."

The curse. Ikrit had come to Anakin's room the night he'd returned from the Palace of the Woolamander. He'd explained to

Nancy Richardson

Anakin that four hundred years ago he'd discovered the globe in the ruins of the palace, which had been built thousands of years earlier by an ancient race called the Massassi.

Ikrit said that he couldn't break the curse, so he'd curled up at the base of the globe to wait for the people who could. Those people were Anakin and Tahiri. When Anakin had told Tahiri what Ikrit had said, she'd agreed that they had to work together to break into the crystal sphere that was locked with a riddle and filled with glittering golden sands and the cries of trapped Massassi children.

"I think you're right," Anakin said to Tahiri now. "Understanding what the Massassi wrote in their palace will help us to unravel the riddle of the globe. But right now, we've got to concentrate on helping Lyric."

He didn't add that he'd seen Ikrit. Or tell Tahiri Ikrit's words. It was enough to feel that what he and Tahiri were doing was right. And to know that he felt drawn both to Lyric and her moon. The shuttle dipped toward Yavin 8. Anakin watched the moon grow in size as they sped toward its surface. He could see that it was covered with brown and green tundra and a ridge of purple mountains that jutted from its surface.

Moments later, the ship gently touched down, only a few hundred meters from the mountains. Lyric moved back to join her friends. In the time of the flight, her breathing had become alarmingly labored. It escaped from her mouth in deep rattles and hisses, and Anakin could see that the effort of drawing air was exhausting her. Lyric raised one hand to brush her red ringlets from her eyes.

Anakin gasped. In the last hour, the pink webs on her hands had spread until they reached the tips of her fingers. It was clearly getting close to the time for her changing ceremony. The silver door of the shuttle hissed open. Old Peckhum, Anakin, and Tahiri followed their friend down the ramp. Waiting for them were five Melodie children.

STAR WARS: Lyric's World

"Welcome," one of the Melodies began, but he stopped when he saw Lyric.

"Come," he said, "we've got to get Lyric to the cove quickly."

The look of worry on his face told Anakin all he needed to know. He reached up and took hold of Lyric's elbow. Tahiri moved to the other side, and together they helped Lyric half walk, half run to the mountains that loomed before them.

"Oh no!" Peckhum cried as he followed the children toward the mountain.

"What is it?" Anakin asked as he ran.

"I forgot some of the supplies I need to transport after we leave Yavin 8," Peckhum worriedly explained. "It wouldn't be important, except they're medical supplies, and this trip has already put me behind schedule. "

"Go back and get them," Anakin called over his shoulder. "You'll only be gone for a few hours, and we'll be fine. Just come find us in the mountains when you return."

"I don't think I should leave you. Luke Skywalker wouldn't be pleased," Peckhum said uncertainly.

"Don't worry," Anakin replied. "He'll understand." He stopped, and turned to Peckhum. "We'll be careful."

"All right," Peckhum said. "But don't get into any trouble while I'm gone." He turned and raced back to the *Lightning Rod*. Moments later he shot into the sky and disappeared from view.

Anakin ran to catch up with his friends. Barely a moment later, the ear-shattering shriek of an avril rolled down over the group. Anakin didn't have to ask what creature had made the sound. He felt its enormous shadow fall across his back before he looked up to see blood red talons slashing down toward the group. The Melodies quickly formed a circle and began to heave stones up at the creature. Several hit, but only maddened the black bird. Tahiri grabbed a large rock and threw it, hard. Her shot struck the avril directly between the eyes. It shrieked in anger and dove toward her, beak open, talons outstretched.

Nancy Richardson

Tahiri dodged, but not before one of its massive wings struck and threw her meters away from the group. Anakin raced over to protect his friend. But he wasn't quick enough. The avril dove toward Tahiri, talons outstretched, its scream of attack mingling with her cry of terror. Anakin was too far away to reach her, and dread washed over him in an icy cold wave. A split second before Tahiri was swept away in the avril's hungry grasp, Lyric, who was closest to her, leapt forward. She threw her body over Tahiri's to shield her friend.

The avril sank his talons into the orange academy jumpsuit Lyric wore, and shot toward the sky. Lyric hung limply in the air. All who stood helpless on the tundra of the moon could see the look of terror on Lyric's face as she was borne away.

Chapter Five

“Where is it taking her?” Tahiri cried.

Both she and Anakin whirled to face the Melodies.

“There is nothing to be done,” one of the young boys said sadly. “It will take her to its nest and she will be gone before we can ever reach it. “

“But she’s survived before,” Anakin said.

“Yes, but this time she is too weak, she is ready for the changing. If she is not in the waters of the cove before sunrise, she will die,” the boy replied.

“Where’s the nest?” Anakin asked in a voice that couldn’t be argued with.

The boy pointed to a spot halfway up the mountain, and Anakin and Tahiri immediately raced toward it.

“Be here when we return to take us to the cove,” Anakin called over his shoulder.

They’d been climbing for over an hour. Anakin could hear the rasp of his breath, the thundering of his heart. Tahiri was right behind him. She, too, was gasping. There was less oxygen in the air because of the altitude, and several times Anakin had felt dizzy, felt black walls threatening to close out his consciousness, and he’d turned around to make sure Tahiri was still on her feet. They didn’t speak as they climbed. Instead they focused on the

Nancy Richardson

dark hole where the young Melodie had pointed. Believe and you succeed, Anakin thought as he climbed.

That was part of the Jedi Code. Anakin repeated it over and over in his head. He saw the purplish rocks beneath his scraped hands begin to lighten as dawn threatened to cover the moon in its soft glow. Anakin climbed faster. They stopped five meters from the entrance to the avril's nest. Anakin could hear the creature shrieking within the shallow cave. He and Tahiri crept forward, trying not to dislodge any rocks. They didn't want the bird to know they were there. Carefully they moved toward the opening, peeking around rocks until they were directly below the cave.

Anakin raised himself up slowly and peered into the dimly lit cavern. He smelled the foul air and heard the rustling and chirping of the creature's chicks before his eyes grew used to the cave. Then he saw Lyric. She was alive. Her body hung over the edge of the avril's nest, ringlets of red hair reaching down to the ground. As she had done before, she was chirping, trying to sound like the mottled black chicks around her. Anakin could hear Lyric struggling for the breath she needed to make the noises.

She could barely gasp out the sounds. Still, her efforts had been enough to confuse the creature, whose black head was cocked to one side as it towered above her. But Lyric's efforts were not enough to send the avril out looking for more food. Anakin crouched back down and crawled over to Tahiri.

"I've got to go in there," Anakin mouthed to his friend.

A look of alarm spread across Tahiri's features.

"I'm going to try to get the avril to leave her nest to search for more food."

"I'm going too," Tahiri mouthed back.

"No, stay hidden in the rocks. I might need your help, or Lyric might. It won't do us any good if the avril attacks us both," Anakin whispered furiously.

"I don't like this," Tahiri mouthed with a scowl.

Anakin turned and crept back up to the nest. Then he let out a shriek. The avril burst out of the cave and loomed above him, her beak open wide in an ear-shattering cry. Anakin stood fast and shrieked again, in what he hoped was the sound of one of the creature's chicks. He saw the bird's beady eyes boring down on him. And when the avril rushed forward, he was struck by foul, sour air. With a swift motion, the bird grasped him in its beak and flung him into her nest. Anakin curled into a ball next to the chicks and continued to shriek. The avril began to hop from foot to foot, wings flapping in distress.

That's right, Anakin thought, I'm not dinner. Go out and find some food for your hungry babies. Lyric continued to chirp and attempted a shriek, but her lungs couldn't sustain the effort. Then, with a sudden burst, the avril left her nest and soared away from the mountain.

"Anakin, are you all right?" Tahiri called as she scrambled to the opening of the cave.

"I'm fine," Anakin replied. "But Lyric's in bad shape. We've got to get her out of here."

Tahiri wrinkled her nose as the thick, dank smell of the cave struck her. Then she climbed into the nest and began to help Anakin lift Lyric.

"Leave me," Lyric gasped. "It's too late. Save yourselves. The avril will be back soon."

"There is no try, only do," Tahiri muttered under her breath as she hoisted one of Lyric's arms over her shoulders. Anakin lifted the other one. As they dragged their friend from the avril's nest, both Anakin and Tahiri saw the symbols carved in the purple rocks.

"This is the same place she was taken before," Tahiri gasped in surprise.

"We'd better hurry," Anakin said. They quickly left the cave and began the journey down the mountain. At times Lyric tried to take a step or two, but her efforts didn't last long. Any movement made it too difficult for her to breathe. Finally,

Nancy Richardson

Anakin hoisted Lyric onto his back. He listened to her wheezing breaths in his ear as he carried her. Tahiri scrambled down the rocks in front of him, then helped him keep his balance as he climbed down. They were running out of time. Suddenly they heard the maddened scream of the avril overhead.

“Over here,” a boy’s voice called. Anakin saw the young Melodie he’d told to wait. With renewed energy, he moved quickly over to the boy. Several more Melodies were waiting, and they lifted Lyric off Anakin’s back and carried her through a small hole in the rocks. The avril landed by the hole and shrieked angrily. It was too small for her to follow her prey. Anakin, Tahiri, and the Melodies heard the creature scraping at the rocks with her talons. Her scrapes and cries faded into the distance as the group raced through a tunnel in the mountain. Anakin and Tahiri followed the Melodies. The tunnel within the purple mountain of Sistra wound deep, and just when Anakin began to fear that Lyric would run out of time before they reached the cove, the afternoon light began to pour over the group.

They reached an opening, and before them was a circular area, roughly ten meters round, filled with water that was blanketed with blue-green algae. The Melodies who carried Lyric moved toward the edge of the pool and gently slid Lyric in. She floated on the bed of algae for a moment, then slowly sank beneath it and disappeared from view. Tahiri and Anakin stared at the blue-green pool of water. It rippled with movement from beneath its surface. Anakin turned and studied the cove. It was set deep within the mountain, but the jagged rocks that ringed it did not close out the sky.

The entire cove was open to a shaft of thick sunlight. Perched on the rocks surrounding the pool were young Melodies with bagfuls of stones.

“She’ll be all right now,” one of the Melodies said in a voice that sounded like the soft patter of water falling on dry sand. “You brought her in time.”

Chapter Six

Anakin took the bag of stones and sharp spear that one of the Melodies held out to him. Then he moved to a flat rock next to the spot where Lyric had disappeared and crouched, ready to defend his friend. Anakin hoped that he could help protect Lyric and the other changelings by using the Force, but if not, he'd use the weapons that rested at his feet. Tahiri, too, was given a sack of stones and a spear. Anakin looked at his friend. Her orange jumpsuit was covered with purplish smudges of dirt from the mountains, and dust streaked her white blonde hair. Tahiri met Anakin's ice blue eyes. Her own green ones flashed. She, too, was determined to protect their friend. Suddenly a young girl raced into the sunlight of the cove.

"The eggs!" the girl cried. "They're attacking the eggs!"

Anakin felt the terror of the girl's voice cut through him like a lightsaber. He jumped to his feet.

"Stay here and watch out for Lyric," he called to Tahiri. Then he raced to the tunnel behind two Melodies. They tore through the dark passageways. Anakin felt the raiths before he saw them. He sensed their hunger, their frenzied aggression. The group rounded a corner, rocks poised. Before them was a large cavern stacked with pure white eggs. And in its center were three enormous black rodents, their thick, hairless, green tails lashing

Nancy Richardson

madly as they faced the two young female Melodies who stood between them and the eggs. The girls stood, rocks ready to throw. The Melodies beside Anakin didn't budge. They were frozen by their own fear.

"Don't move," Anakin called softly to the girls. The creatures were too large to be killed with mere stones. Once the Melodies began their attack, the rodents would be on them. The girls wouldn't survive, Anakin thought. Anakin moved between the Melodies and stood directly behind the raiths, spear poised. The loathsome rodents heard him approach and turned. They reared on massive haunches and snarled. On their hind legs, they stood a full three meters. Anakin watched thick brown saliva drip from their pointed teeth. A steady calm washed over Anakin, and he opened himself to the Force. He could feel the beating of the rodents' hearts, feel the air rustle as their black whiskers twitched.

"Did you think I was going to let you have all the fun?" a soft voice whispered as Tahiri joined Anakin. She held her spear before her.

"Let them attack first," Tahiri said quietly. "If they're anything like the joined Anakin. She held her spear before her.

"Let them attack first," Tahiri said quietly. "If they're anything like the womp rats on Tatooine, you'll be able to sense which way they'll strike a split second before they like the womp rats on Tatooine, you'll be able to sense which way they'll strike a split second before they--"

Tahiri's explanation was cut short as one of the raiths emitted a high-pierced whine and launched itself. She ducked sideways, keeping her spear vertical. The raith impaled itself on the sharp tip. Tahiri hardly noticed the thick green blood that sprang from the wound. She wrenched her spear out of the dead creature and turned to face the other two rodents. Anakin moved with one graceful motion as a raith leapt toward him, its teeth gnashing. He rolled forward and met the creature with his spear midair. It screamed in anger and pain, then fell in a crumple to the floor.

"Anakin, watch out!" Tahiri cried. Anakin lunged sideways as the third raith flew toward him. He had not had time to pull his spear out of the one he'd just fought. Now, weaponless, he stood facing a snarling raith, driven mad by the death of its companions and its own hunger and frustration. He could feel the rodent's hot, rancid breath on his face, and he crouched in readiness to spring sideways when the beast attacked.

"Hey, big guy, over here," Tahiri called out from behind the raith. It twisted and sprung at her in one powerful movement. Tahiri was ready, and seconds later the rodent lay twitching at her feet. For a moment the cavern was filled with silence. The pure white eggs almost seemed to glow around them.

"We'd better get back to the cove," Anakin finally said.

The Melodies nodded, then led the two Jedi candidates through the tunnels. All was quiet when they entered the light of the cove.

"How did you fight the raiths so well?" one of the Melodies asked Anakin once he was settled on a rock by the pool.

"We have been fighting them all our lives," the girl added.

"But never like that." Anakin met her questioning gaze.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"Sannah," the girl replied.

The Melodie looked about nine years old, Anakin thought. He wondered how old she really was. Her white forehead was furrowed in concentration as she gazed intently at Anakin with yellow eyes ringed with thick, brown lashes.

"Sannah, do you know what the Force is?" he began.

She shook her head.

"It's an energy field generated by all living things. It surrounds everything, and binds the galaxy together. At the Jedi academy we learn to feel that field, to control, sense, and alter it. The skills we develop also help us to sense emotions. Tahiri and I used our abilities to feel the raiths' anger, to sense their movements at the split second before they made them. By doing that, we could anticipate where they would strike."

Nancy Richardson

“And if I want to learn these things?” Sannah said softly. “If I want to learn how to fight so that I can protect my people?”

Anakin stared into the girl’s yellow eyes. It was clear that she desperately wanted to be of help. But he also sensed her anger. Sannah had obviously lost many she loved to the predators on her planet. How could he help her to understand?

“The Force is meant to be used for peace, knowledge, and serenity. Using it in anger will lead to the dark side, a place where the Force is used for evil,” Anakin began. “There was once a man named Darth Vader who used the Force to help destroy the Jedi Knights and create an Empire designed to rule through aggression and corruption. His real name was Anakin Skywalker, and he was my grandfather.”

The young Melodie gasped.

“My uncle, the Jedi Master Luke Skywalker, created the Jedi academy to help fill the galaxy again with Jedi Knights who are pledged to defend good against evil,” Anakin explained. “But he teaches us about Darth Vader and all the other evil men and women who used the Force in anger and aggression. By learning about them, we can protect ourselves from following in their footsteps, because the lure of the dark side can be powerful.”

“Does it frighten you to be named after an evil man?” Sannah asked innocently.

“Sometimes,” Anakin said softly. For a moment he could hear the dark voices that rose from the spiral stairway in the Palace of the Woolamander. Voices that told him he was just like his grandfather, and goaded him to use the Force to strike out in anger. Voices dripping with menace and warning that whoever tried to break through the field surrounding the golden globe would fail, would die. He shrugged off the memory as he flung thick brown bangs from his eyes.

“Do you know anything about the strange symbols carved in the rock walls of Sistra?” Anakin asked Sannah.

“Yes,” she replied matter-of-factly. “Some of us have seen carvings in the mountains. They’re in the lower tunnels and

STAR WARS: Lyric's World

several of the caverns and caves. Some say they're a message from an ancient race."

"Do you think they're right?" Anakin asked.

"Yes, I think they are," Sannah replied.

Chapter Seven

“How many changelings are there?” Tahiri asked the girl who crouched beside Anakin. Sannah stared down at the pool.

“Lyric is one of a spawned group of seven,” she replied.

“How do you know if they’re all right down there?” Tahiri asked with a nod at the pool. Except for a few ripples and splashes, the water remained calm.

“We check on them every few hours,” Sannah explained.

“But if you’re not a changeling or an elder, how can you breathe underwater?” Anakin said in surprise.

Sannah pulled several long rectangles of green material from a pocket on the tunic she wore.

“We weave this material out of the stems of the trico plant,” Sannah said. “Then we sew it together to form a large pocket. We pack the pocket with the blue-green algae that floats on top of the pool, and tie it over our nose and mouth. The trico repels water, and the algae allows us to breathe oxygen beneath the surface for several minutes.”

“Can we go see Lyric?” Anakin asked.

“Er, Anakin, have you forgotten that I can’t swim?” Tahiri whispered.

STAR WARS: Lyric's World

Anakin hadn't forgotten. He'd never forget watching Tahiri struggle beneath the waters of the river on Yavin 4. He'd never forget that she'd almost drowned.

"Tahiri, one of us has to stay on the surface to help the Melodies fight if any predators attack," Anakin said. "So if it's all right with you, I'll go see Lyric."

"It's all right with me," Tahiri said in a relieved voice.

Sannah helped Anakin scoop algae out of the pool and pack it into the trico filter.

"It may be difficult for you to breathe at first," Sannah warned. "Until your body relaxes and gets used to breathing oxygen from the algae, you will try to struggle for air. Once the filter is on, sit for a moment before you enter the water."

Anakin lifted up the filter and Sannah helped him tie it. He moved toward a rock and sat down. He realized he was holding his breath, and slowly exhaled. However, when he went to inhale, his lungs struggled to pull in air, struggled for the type of oxygen they'd always processed. Anakin felt a dull pounding in his ears, and his vision blurred. I'm not going to pass out, he instructed himself. He forced himself to remain calm, to inhale and exhale. Moments later he was breathing the oxygen from the algae. Tahiri's concerned face came into view. Anakin reassured his friend with his ice blue eyes. Then he moved to the edge of the algae pool and slipped in. It took several moments to adjust to the murky water below the surface. The algae filtered out most of the sunlight from above, and only narrow shafts of light lit his way.

Anakin swam through the water, breathing shallowly and searching for his friend. The pool was roughly two meters deep, and he passed several changeling forms in the water. They all wore the same pale green tunic that Sannah wore. As he swam, Anakin noticed that most of the changelings still had partial legs, although they were beginning to fuse together with thick webs striped with pale blue, green, orange, and pink. The Melodies didn't take notice of him as he passed them. They slowly rolled in

Nancy Richardson

the water as the currents sent from his movement washed over them, but their eyes were closed. It was almost as if they were asleep. Anakin had still not seen Lyric. A flash of orange caught Anakin's eye. He moved through the bodies toward his friend, still dressed in her academy jumpsuit.

He reached Lyric and saw that she, too, was sleeping. Her jumpsuit now hung in tatters around her legs as they fused together and broke the seams that had once made pant legs. Thick red hair floated around her still face. Anakin almost let out a cry as Lyric suddenly opened her yellow eyes and met his gaze. She must have sensed his presence, he thought. Lyric's look told Anakin what he needed to know: she was all right. And she knew that he and Tahiri were still there protecting her. Slowly Lyric closed her eyes. Anakin reached over and held her hand. He would stay with her until his oxygen began to run out.

Something was wrong!

Anakin wasn't certain if he'd heard Tahiri cry or if he'd sensed her fear. Gently releasing Lyric's hand, he shot through the murky waters and burst through the blanket of algae. It covered his eyes in thick strands, and for a moment he was blinded. Then he saw it. An enormous reel, deep violet in color, was hissing furiously before Tahiri, who stood between the snake and the pool of water.

"Throw me a spear!" Tahiri cried over to a Melodie. But the young boy couldn't seem to move. He was terrified.

"Throw me a spear!" Tahiri yelled again. The snake's black forked tongue flicked toward Tahiri. It was tasting its prey. Anakin could sense the frustration and fear in Tahiri's cry. Sannah tried to move to grab a spear for Tahiri, but at her movement the snake turned as if to strike her, and she shrank back.

"I'm right behind you, Tahiri," Anakin called softly.

"Wish you were in front of me," Tahiri called back. "Cause I'm not sure how to fight this thing. I tried to copy its hissing, like Lyric did to save Tionne, but it doesn't seem to like my

voice.” In a lightning strike, the snake leapt at Tahiri. She sprang sideways and it just missed grasping her in its thick coils. Tahiri lay sprawled on her back as the reel circled its prey. When it struck again, she rolled sideways. This time it didn’t circle, but lashed out immediately. Tahiri couldn’t get to her feet fast enough to evade the serpentine creature. Instantly she was trapped within half-meter - thick violet coils.

“Help me, Anakin!” Tahiri screamed. “It’s crushing me!”

The Melodies around the cove came to life and began to pummel the reel with their rocks. Several attempted to stab it with spears, but their weapons fell to the ground, unable to pierce the creature’s thick scales. It seemed impervious to attack, and continued to constrict around Tahiri’s body.

“Anakin!” Tahiri gasped. Anakin leapt out of the water, grabbed a spear, and launched himself onto the reel. He stood on the creature’s slick body and tried to stab through its thick scales. With a sharp crack, his spear broke in two. The reel began to roll, bearing down on Tahiri. Anakin was tossed to the rocks. There are all kinds of strength, he thought as he got to his feet. He could see Tahiri’s face, barely visible within the snake’s coils. It was a face contorted with pain. Soon, the reel would crush her. Anakin closed his eyes. He reached out with the Force and pried into the snake’s body. The creature was cold-blooded, and Anakin immediately felt chilled. He felt the reel’s cartilage, its muscles, even the beating of the creature’s heart. He focused on the heart. Focused on slowing its beat. He felt the constricting coils begin to relax, to loosen.

Slower, slower, slower, he thought, until he opened his eyes, startled. The heart had stopped completely. Tahiri lay in the relaxed coils of the dead reel. Anakin climbed over rows of coils to his friend.

“Tahiri, are you all right?” he asked. Slowly Tahiri opened her eyes. She’d passed out from the grip of the snake. She stared at Anakin, not comprehending. Then her eyes grew wide and she let out a cry.

Nancy Richardson

"It's all right," Anakin said as he helped her throw off a thick violet coil and stand up. "Are you okay?" 54

"Feels like one of my ribs might be cracked," Tahiri said with a grimace of pain. "But other than that, I'm fine." She gave Anakin a little smile. "How'd you get it to let me go?" she asked.

"My spear wasn't any use, so I closed my eyes and used the Force," Anakin explained. "I found its heart and focused on slowing it to weaken the snake. I guess I slowed it so much that it stopped, and the reel died."

Anakin fell silent. He was surprised at his own power. Sannah walked up to the two Jedi candidates.

"I don't understand how you defeated the reel, but we are thankful. Tonight," she said with a grin at the dead snake at their feet, "we will all eat well."

Chapter Eight

The thick shaft of sunlight that had glanced off the algae on the top of the pool began to fade. The rocks surrounding the cove of water darkened into a rich purple hue. Young Melodies still perched around the pool, rocks and spears in hand. Since the reel died, the cove had been quiet. One of the Melodies tied on a filter and slipped into the pool. “It is done,” he cried as he resurfaced.

The Melodies moved down from the rocks and gathered by the pool. The changelings surfaced one by one, still groggy from their metamorphosis. Hands pulled each from the waters, revealing shimmering tails striped with blue, green, purple, pink, and orange. The changelings were carried back into the tunnels of the mountain.

“Where are they taking them?” Tahiri worriedly asked Sannah.

“They have changed,” Sannah replied. “They are being taken to the crystal waters where the elders live. But we must move them quickly - they are still very weak and can’t be out of the water for too long.”

Anakin and Tahiri stood breathlessly at the edge of the pool. Lyric hadn’t emerged yet. Then Anakin saw Lyric’s bright red hair. She swam slowly to the side of the pool and allowed a group of Melodies to pull her from the waters. Her orange

Nancy Richardson

jumpsuit had disappeared, and her body was completely changed. Where her legs had been, a shimmering, multicolored fish tail now appeared. Several long gill slits lined her ribs, and her fingers were now completely attached by glistening pick webs. Lyric smiled weakly at her friends as they helped carry her through the mountain. The passageway they traveled wound up into the mountain. The Melodies carried the changelings carefully, half running through the steep tunnels. Then suddenly their pace slowed.

“Why are we stopping?” Anakin called out to the group in front of him.

“Raith,” was the frightened reply. Anakin and Tahiri gently put Lyric on the rocks, then raced past the group of Melodies in front of them. They ran down the tunnel, following the stricken cries of a male Melodie. As the tunnel veered left, they stopped short. The raith had already bitten one of the Melodies. The boy lay wounded, but alive. Now the foul creature crouched on its haunches, snarling at the female Melodie that had moved to stand between it and the boy it had wounded.

It was Sannah.

“Sannah, don’t move!” Anakin cried.

But his warning was too late. The giant black rodent gave a throaty growl and launched toward the young girl, teeth bared. She dove sideways, flipping in the air, and landed on her feet. The infuriated raith charged again. This time Sannah whirled sideways, spear raised. The sharp tip glanced off the raith’s flank, and it whined at the burning pain. But it wasn’t a mortal wound and the creature turned again, thick brown threads of drool flying from its jaws as it snarled at Sannah. When it charged again, Sannah leapt back, and the raith’s jagged teeth snapped on thin air. Then, using the split second the creature took to regain its balance, Sannah charged. Her spear ran straight through the belly of the raith. The massive black rodent fell dead at her feet.

"You used the Force, didn't you?" Anakin asked Sannah, breaking the awed hush of the room. Sannah turned toward Anakin, still breathless from her battle.

"I don't know how I did it," she replied. "I just felt it."

"You did it well," Anakin said with a small smile. Then he turned and followed Tahiri back to Lyric, whom they helped the young Melodies lift. The tunnel curled upward for several more minutes, then suddenly ended. It emptied out into an enormous cavern filtered with light from small holes in the sides and top of the rocks. The late - afternoon sun played off the deep crystal blue waters in the center of the chamber. The Melodies moved to the side of the waters that gently lapped at the rocks. They slid the changelings into the liquid darkness. Then the elders surfaced and called their greetings to the children. Their bodies moved swiftly along the surface of the water as their hands reached for the changelings, held them as parents embrace their children.

Children who are finally home. Anakin and Tahiri watched as the elders celebrated the changing of their young. They leapt into the air and twisted and somersaulted before diving back down into the waters again. They splashed delightedly, their tails shimmering. Several elders perched at the edge of the pool and spoke with the children who had not yet been changed. They caught up on what had happened, eyed the Jedi candidates, and offered shy smiles. Anakin sensed that the elders yearned for the day when the next changelings would come safely into their depths. Because until that moment, they couldn't truly protect their young.

"Will they be safe now?" Tahiri asked Sannah when she came over to speak to her and Anakin.

"Yes," Sannah said with a sweet smile. "They are safe in the high waters. The raiths and the purella cannot swim, and the reels do not come this high in the mountain," she explained.

"Anakin, Tahiri," a voice bubbled from the waters. Lyric floated behind the Jedi candidates. She smiled happily at them, and swam to the side of the pool.

Nancy Richardson

“Thank you,” Lyric said. “I have heard how you fought the raiths and a reel. Are you okay, Tahiri?” she said with concern.

“I’m fine,” Tahiri replied.

“You saved not only my life, but the lives of several other Melodies,” Lyric said. “The elders wish to reward you for your bravery. They asked me what would be suitable, and I suggested that you be allowed to come beneath the surface of these waters to speak with an old one who we call the keeper of legends. He may know something about your strange symbols. Would you like to do that?” Lyric asked.

“Would we?” Tahiri cried. “Wild banthas couldn’t stop us!”

Chapter Nine

Tahiri leaned forward and took one of the trico filters that lay on Sannah's lap. Anakin stared in surprise at his friend.

"I haven't forgotten that I can't swim," Tahiri explained. "But there's no way I'm going to miss this. Anyway, as long as I can breathe underwater, it doesn't matter that I can't swim. You and Lyric can help me." Tahiri took out her multitool and cut down the filter Sannah had handed her until it was the right size for her small face. Then she let Sannah tie the algae-filled filter over her nose and mouth. For a moment, Tahiri couldn't breathe and a feeling of dizzying panic clutched at her throat. She forced herself to relax, just as she'd seen Anakin do. When she could finally breathe, she moved to the edge of the crystal blue waters. Sannah handed Tahiri and Anakin several large rocks to place in their pockets before they entered the water.

"You will need the added weight," Sannah explained. "You are going deep."

"I'll help you," Lyric sang up to Tahiri, and beckoned her friend into the waters with her pale, graceful arms. Tahiri dipped her toe into the warm water. She sat down on the rocky edge of the pool and slowly lowered herself until the water swallowed her body. Lyric floated by Tahiri's side, her arm around the girl's waist, her powerful tail fin keeping Tahiri's head above water.

Nancy Richardson

Anakin slipped into the water and moved to Tahiri's other side. He, too, wrapped an arm around her waist.

"Ready?" Anakin said to Tahiri.

"As I'll ever be," Tahiri replied with a nervous smile.

"Do not be frightened," Lyric called to Tahiri. "We will be traveling deep within the waters to the place where the oldest of my species live. There, I hope, you will find the answer to your questions."

Tahiri allowed herself to sink below the surface of the crystal blue water. Anakin and Lyric kept hold of her as they descended into the depths. At first Tahiri felt panicky and breathed through the filter in ragged gasps. Her eyes rolled wildly from side to side. Once, she tried to struggle out of the arms of her friends, but they held her steady until she relaxed. Tahiri saw hundreds of elder Melodies swimming around them as Lyric pulled her friends deeper and deeper with swift, powerful thrusts of her tail fin. The elders were so beautiful and graceful, Tahiri thought as they traveled through the crystal waters. Strange, Tahiri pondered, as she studied the underwater world, it was light beneath the surface of the water.

She had expected to be swallowed in blackness. The purple rocks of the mountain actually glowed, and streaks of neon scribbled through the waters as Anakin and Lyric dragged her downward.

"Kick with your feet," a soft gurgling voice said from behind Tahiri. Tahiri turned her head and saw an elder, his blond hair, as long as her own, floating in tendrils around his face. His tail was a darker shade of pink than Lyric's, and it sparkled in the waters.

"Kick with your feet," the elder said again.

Tahiri began to kick.

"Let her go for a moment," the Melodie instructed Lyric and Anakin. Slowly they unwound their arms from Tahiri's waist.

"Use your arms like this," the Melodie said as he demonstrated how to move through the waters by pulling his arms from his head to his side.

STAR WARS: Lyric's World

Tahiri tried. And, although she didn't shoot through the water as he did, she did move, all by herself.

"Am I swimming?" Tahiri gurgled from beneath her mask.

"Yes," the Melodie said with a large smile and a laugh that sounded like a waterfall.

"This is my father," Lyric sang out to Tahiri and Anakin. "His name is Gyle." Lyric floated over to the elder, and he wrapped her in an embrace.

"You have helped bring me my daughter. Thank you," Gyle said.

Just then a school of silver - backed fish streamed through the Jedi candidates. Tahiri panicked, and tried to thrash her way back to the surface. Several of the elders encircled her and swam her back down to Anakin and Lyric.

"There is nothing to fear down here, little one," Gyle said when Tahiri was back in their midst. "Come, there is not much time, we must go farther. Tahiri, hold my hand. Anakin, hold Lyric's."

Gyle and Lyric led the Jedi candidates swiftly through their world. Tahiri and Anakin took in its beauty as they streamed through the waters. There were glowing caverns, vibrant-colored fish striped with shades of blues, greens, and yellows, and elders everywhere, playing in the liquid of their world. Gyle came to a stop before the mouth of a purple cavern whose surface was lined with stones that glistened red.

"Aragon!" Gyle called into the cave.

There was a rush of water, and then the elder floated gently out. He was smaller than Gyle, and his long hair flowed in a cloud of white around his face. His yellow eyes were large as he studied Anakin and Tahiri, who floated in front of him in their orange academy jumpsuits.

"Aragon, these children are Jedi candidates from the academy we sent Lyric to on Yavin 4," Gyle began. "They have come to ask about the strange symbols that are carved in some of the tunnels and on the rock wall of an avril's lair. Since you're the

Nancy Richardson

keeper of legends, and the oldest of us, I thought you might know of these things.”

“I think I have seen the symbols you speak of,” Aragon gurgled. “But I can no longer remember where, or what they mean. Ask something else of me—I can tell you legends about almost anything beneath these waters, but the old story you ask about was told to me more than a hundred years ago. It is a mere whisper in my ancient mind.”

Anakin and Tahiri couldn’t hide the disappointment in their eyes.

“I am sorry,” Aragon said sadly. “I see that I have failed you.”

Tahiri let Aragon’s words sink in. Aragon hadn’t failed them, she thought. It was she and Anakin who had failed, who had been unable to discover a way to decipher the strange symbols. And in failing, they had given up any chance to destroy the evil that held children trapped within the golden globe.

Tahiri thought about the Jedi Code. Luke Skywalker had said that there was no try, only do. But she and Anakin had tried. Or had they?

“Anakin, Aragon once knew the information we need,” Tahiri thought out loud.

“So the memory is somewhere in his mind, he just can’t find it, right?” Anakin nodded. He saw at once what Tahiri meant.

“Aragon,” he said, “would you let us try to help you remember where the symbols are and what they mean?”

The elder met the boy’s ice blue gaze. It was clear to him that the children’s request was not one of idle curiosity; they truly needed to know.

“Yes,” he replied gravely. “Help me to remember if you can.”

Chapter Ten

Anakin floated before the elder named Aragon as he struggled to put into words a skill he'd always had. He could remember when he was two years old and took apart his first droid with his siblings, Jaina and Jacen. He could remember the first time he'd seen a lightsaber, heard about the Force, learned about good and evil. But how did he travel through his mind, picking up memories as easily as he'd drawn the symbols carved in the Palace of the Woolamander?

"Close your eyes," Anakin said to Aragon. "Think back to the one who told you the stories. To the one who was the keeper of legends before you."

"That was my mother," Aragon gurgled softly. "Her name was Esla. She was taught the legends from her father, and so on and so on, stretching back thousands of years."

"Can you see her in your mind's eye?" Anakin asked softly.

"She was beautiful," Aragon replied. "Thick, long, black hair that reached well past her waist, lovely yellow eyes, lips the color of the palest pink webbing. She told me the stories every day of my life, until she passed away. We'd swim together in the waters and her pure voice would ring with legends... the legends of my people, and of the ones who came to ask our help."

Nancy Richardson

“Who were they?” Anakin asked, trying to control the tension in his voice. Trying to gently lead the elder down the path to remembrance.

“I cannot recall their names,” Aragon said thickly as he struggled through the dust-covered corridors of his memory. “Only that they came to Sistra in search of help for their children. Children who were enslaved by some unnamed darkness. Our own children found them wandering through the mountains and brought them to the elders. But we couldn’t help them!” Aragon cried, remembering his mother’s grief in the telling of the legend. “We could not leave our moon, the water. And so they left their messages carved in the rocks and tunnels of our world, in the hopes that someday someone might read them and come to their aid.”

“And the symbols?” Anakin asked. “Do you know what each one means?”

“I’m afraid I do not,” Aragon answered. “I saw some once, deep in the belly of the mountain where the purella dwell, and my mother told me what they meant. But it was so long ago, so long ago...”

Aragon fell silent, lost in his memories. Another dead end, Anakin thought wearily. He felt his breathing becoming more labored, and knew it was time to resurface.

“Thank you,” he said to Aragon. “The algae in our filters won’t last much longer,” he told Lyric. “We need to go back to the surface.”

Lyric looked sadly at her two friends.

“I’m sorry,” she said as she and Gyle propelled Anakin and Tahiri away from the elder.

“Wait,” Tahiri cried. She broke away from Gyle and clumsily kicked her way back to the elder.

“What is it, child?” Aragon asked. “You said that you couldn’t remember what each symbol meant,” Tahiri said breathlessly, her head pounding as the oxygen from the algae grew thinner, “but do you remember what the message was? Because if you do, we

can find it in the bottom of the mountain, decipher what each symbol means from the whole message, and then use them to translate the carvings on our own moon!"

Aragon was quiet for a moment. He closed his eyes and dove into the dark recesses of his mind, searching for the information Tahiri asked.

"I saw the strange symbols at the base of the deepest tunnel of Sistra," Aragon said slowly, wrenching the long-forgotten memory from a corner in his mind. "My mother told me the symbols read, 'Peace to all. We are the Massassi. We beg the ones who read this message to travel to the fourth moon. Break the curse that the evil Jedi Knight Exar Kun made to enslave the Massassi and imprison our children. We cannot break the curse ourselves, but will leave a message in our palace to help those who can.'"

Aragon met Tahiri's green eyes with his own. "Does that help you, child?" he asked.

"Yes," Tahiri gasped. "Thank you."

Gyle and Lyric grasped the hands of the Jedi candidates and quickly led them back to the surface, their tail fins furiously swishing through the crystal waters, scribbling streaks of neon behind them. Tahiri felt her lungs tightening as she ran out of oxygen. She clawed at her pockets and released the rocks that weighted her down. The pounding in her head became dizzying, and she was afraid that she might lose consciousness. Just in time, she and Anakin burst through the surface. They ripped off their filters and greedily gulped in air. Lyric helped Tahiri swim to the side of the waters, and several Melodie children pulled her out onto the rocks, where Anakin already sat.

"We've got to find those carvings," Anakin said weakly to Tahiri. "Sannah," he said to the girl beside him, "can you take us to the deepest tunnel in the mountain?"

"That is where the purella live," Sannah said in a voice laced with fear. "They are enormous red - bristled spiders with glowing orange eyes. It is strange that you have not seen a purella-every

Nancy Richardson

year one comes to the cove to snatch a child or a changeling. We were lucky this time. The purella is a vicious beast who drags away her prey and traps it within the web of her lair. There is no escape from the web. The victim is consumed slowly,” Sannah explained in a hollow voice.

“Will you take us there?” Anakin asked again.

“I will lead you to the beginning of the deepest tunnel,” Sannah finally replied. “But I will not journey to its base. To do so means certain death. I am willing to risk my life for both of you,” San - nah said, looking from Anakin to Tahiri. “But facing the purella is not risking life, it is embracing death.”

Anakin and Tahiri rose to their feet and walked to the water’s edge. It was time to say good-bye to Lyric. They were determined to unravel the riddle that had held the Massassi children prisoner for thousands of years.

“You are leaving now,” Lyric said sadly as she floated on the surface of the water. “I know that you must return to the academy, but I don’t want you to leave.”

“Lyric, we’ll miss you,” Tahiri said softly.

“You are the two best friends I’ve ever had,” Lyric said in a voice like dropping tears. “I won’t forget you, and I’ll help to teach the Melodie children all that I learned at the academy. Perhaps someday you’ll come back to visit me?”

“I hope so,” Anakin said. He didn’t mention that there was a chance he and Tahiri might never leave Lyric’s mountain. A chance that they would be devoured by an enormous, red-bristled spider. “Good-bye, Lyric. May the Force be with you,” Anakin said.

“And both of you,” Lyric replied. Large salty tears dropped from her eyes and plinked sadly down. Then she dove beneath the surface of the crystal blue waters. The last Anakin and Tahiri saw of their friend was a flash of her glistening pink tail fin.

Chapter Eleven

She was beside herself with hunger and rage. Her underbelly yawned and screamed for the sweet taste of a Melodie. She'd been so close. They hadn't even seen her clinging to the top of the rocks overhead as they'd raced through the passageway with the changelings toward the crystal waters. She'd been ready to drop, to gouge the sharp pincers that lined her mouth into tender flesh. Then she would have flushed her prey with enough poison to immobilize, but not to kill. She liked her food alive. The agonizing scream of a raith as one of the Melodies ran the creature through with a spear broke her pleasant anticipation. She crept along the passageway to drink in the scene with glowing eyes. She'd never seen a Melodie kill so easily. And she'd experienced something she'd never felt before. Fear. She didn't like it. Didn't like it at all.

Her pincers clicked frantically as she remembered how she'd skittered back through the passageways, away from her prey, to the safety of the tunnel where she dwelled. The purella picked her way across her thick black web. The web she'd spun to ensnare a Melodie. Caught in its center was a small raith. She'd come across the black rodent in one of the middle tunnels, and dropped on it in hunger and frustration. Her pincers had plunged deep into the tender skin of its neck, filling the raith with enough

Nancy Richardson

venom to paralyze it so she could drag it back to her web by its thick green tail.

When the venom had worn off, the raith had struggled in the thick stickiness of the purella's web. But the more it had writhed, the more the web had bound its body. Now it could only move its hard, black eyes. They rolled from side to side. She could taste the raith's terror, just as she would soon taste its meat. The purella slowly moved toward the rodent, her eight legs picking through the web with care. She, too, could be caught if she allowed her bristly backside to touch its gummy strands. But that never happened. She moved with an eerie grace, never losing her balance. There was no need to rush once her prey was ensnared. There was no escape from a purella's web.

She felt a slight tremor in the web, and fixed her eyes on the raith. He hadn't moved. Couldn't move. Another tremor, dancing along the strand on tiptoes. The purella skittered back to the edge of her web. A web that not only trapped her prey, but served as a perfectly tuned alarm system that picked up every movement and vibration. Something was traveling in the lower tunnel. The purella usually had to hunt for her prey in the mid-passages of Sistra, but once in a while a raith or reel would come down to the lower tunnel. When that happened, she was always ready. Orange eyes narrowed as she glanced at the ensnared raith.

Her belly ached, but it would have to wait. When she returned, she hoped, she'd have more food. That would be good, because she was hungry. Very hungry.

She slid her body through the crevice that led to her den. Hopping to the rocks, she began to move up the tunnel. A small stone was dislodged from above, and nervously she sprang onto the side wall of the passageway. She flattened her body against the rocks, a two-meter blot of red against the dark purple of the stones. Any creature looking would see her, but in her experience, her prey didn't pay attention to what they couldn't hear.

STAR WARS: Lyric's World

At least the reels and raiths didn't. The Melodies were different, more difficult to trick and snare. Catching them as regular food was too much work-which was why she waited for the changing time. She didn't like to work too hard for her food. And there was no need to. When she heard the sounds she was momentarily puzzled. They were neither the snarls and grunts of raiths nor the slithering hisses of reels. And then she felt the familiar pains in her underbelly, felt thick ropes of saliva begin to form in her mouth and drip heavily from her pincers. Melodies.

Never before had they come here. They knew this was the dwelling place of the purella. She did not pause to wonder why they were here. Instead she skittered to the top of the passageway, over the strange carvings that marred the purple rocks. She would wait, unseen, above them. And when the Melodies came through the tunnel, came to her, she would be ready. Oh yes, she thought greedily, she would be ready.

Chapter Twelve

“This is as far as I can take you,” Sannah whispered. She stood in the rippling pool of yellow that blazed from the torch she carried. Deep within the mountain, there were no holes or cracks in the rocks to let in the soft evening light. As Sannah, Anakin, and Tahiri had descended into the bowels of Sistra, they had been swallowed by the darkness. Without Sannah’s torches, they would not have been able to see.

“What you are about to do is folly,” Sannah warned for the last time. She’d spent the past hour trying to turn the Jedi candidates back from what, to her, meant certain death. But her words had fallen on deaf ears, and there was nothing left to say.

“May your Force be with you,” she solemnly whispered to Anakin and Tahiri. And then she turned and became a receding circle of yellow light, consumed moments later by darkness. Anakin held his torch high to dispel the blackness of the passageway before him. He heard Aragon’s translation of the carved symbols ringing in his ears. If he and Tahiri could see the carvings that Aragon had remembered in this tunnel, and then use Aragon’s translation to decipher the symbols, they’d be able to do the same with the ones from the Palace of the Woolamander.

"Anakin, we forgot to bring something to copy down the symbols," Tahiri whispered, interrupting her friend's thoughts.

"I'll remember them," Anakin reassured Tahiri. Just as he'd recalled the symbols from the palace, he knew he'd be able to draw the carvings in this passageway once they were safely back on Yavin 4. Anakin turned to Tahiri, whose green eyes glowed nervously in the pale yellow light of their torch.

"Are you ready?" Anakin asked.

"Let's get this over with," Tahiri agreed. "I can sense danger."

"Me too," Anakin said softly. "Me too."

Slowly he led Tahiri into the passageway. He held his torch high, his eyes darting from side to side, searching for the red spider he'd never seen but knew enough to be afraid of. The passageway dove steeply into the mountain, and several times Anakin and Tahiri almost lost their footing.

"Anakin, over there!" Tahiri cried. She pointed to a smooth segment in the rocks. Then she raced ahead until she stood before the same strangely twined symbols they'd seen in the palace on Yavin 4. Her eyes raced across the message left in the walls of Sistra by the ancient Massassi.

"This is it, Anakin!" she called back happily. Anakin walked carefully toward his friend. He sensed danger, grave danger. His ice blue eyes studied the rocks around him, but he saw nothing, heard nothing. Maybe all the stories he'd heard from Sannah about the purella had been exaggerations. And perhaps the warnings that were screaming inside his head were his own imagination. Still, all his senses jangled with alarm.

"Tahiri," Anakin began.

But it was too late. The purella that had been silently waiting above the carvings dropped on top of Tahiri, flattening her with its giant red-bristled body. In a split second, eight legs wrapped around Tahiri and four large pincers sank through her orange academy jumpsuit. Tahiri screamed, but her cries ceased as her body jerked once, then fell limp in the spider's deadly embrace. Anakin watched in horror as the purella turned from Tahiri and

Nancy Richardson

slowly approached him, its double-jointed legs moving with casual grace. He began to back away, his torch held in front of his body to ward off the spider's attack.

The creature's eyes glowed orange as they studied him carefully. Anakin's glance flew around the tunnel. It was roughly two meters wide, and so was the spider. There was nowhere to dodge or roll from the creature's attack. So Anakin stood his ground, and when the spider moved forward, he lashed out with his torch, searing one of its legs. Thick ropes of yellow spittle flew from the spider's jaws as it recoiled in pain. The purella's savage eyes glowered at Anakin. And then she sprang toward him, crashing the torch from his grip and quenching its flame. The giant red spider knocked Anakin flat on his back, pinning his arms and legs with four of her eight limbs. He stared up into the spider's horrid face, all jaws, pincers, and glowing eyes that lit the tunnel in orange flame.

Anakin tried to struggle, but the spider was too heavy. The creature studied him as he fought, then languidly sank her needle-sharp pincers into his body. Anakin felt pain, and then the venom coursed through his veins, numbing and paralyzing him. At least he was still awake, Anakin thought. So was Tahiri. The purella pulled both the Jedi candidates along the rocky passageway, their bodies limp with poison, but their minds racing to figure out a way to save themselves. Anakin's eyes rolled from side to side-they were all he could move. He saw Tahiri looking over at him, her large green eyes wide with fear.

The purella continued to drag them deeper into the mountain. Then, quite suddenly, the creature stopped. Anakin lay in the tunnel, unable to move, as he watched the spider wrap Tahiri in its supple red legs and carry her through a crevice in the rocks. Minutes later, the awful creature returned and dragged him through the same crack. Anakin was carried across a thick black web and deposited next to Tahiri and a small raith. The raith was still alive, but hopelessly entangled in the thick black web of the purella. Through the only light in the cave-a surprisingly bright,

eerie orange glow that came from the purella's eyes-Anakin saw that the raith had stopped struggling.

He also saw that the more the rodent had struggled, the tighter he'd been bound in the spider's web. Anakin wanted to tell Tahiri that when the venom wore off, she shouldn't struggle. But at the moment he couldn't move his mouth. He grimly hoped the venom would wear off before the spider decided it was dinnertime. The purella moved away from her prey to the far side of the web. She would wait for the venom to wear off the Melodies. Then they would try to escape, as her prey always did, and the sticky strands of her web would bind them.

Once they could no longer move, she'd have all the time she wanted to savor their warm flesh. She studied her burned leg and the scorched part of her underbelly. She hated when they fought her, like the one had done with the fire. He had hurt her, and she didn't like to be hurt. But in the end, that one would suffer much more than she had. Oh yes, she thought to herself, he would suffer.

Chapter Thirteen

Anakin felt sensation returning to his fingers and toes. Feeling slowly crept up his legs in sharp pricks, swirled across his rib cage, prickled in a stream of warm pain the length of his shoulder blades and neck, and eventually danced all the way to his scalp. But he lay still.

“Tahiri,” Anakin said breathlessly, “don’t move.”

Tahiri nodded, but didn’t reply. She’d also seen the raith, and knew that her struggles would only entangle her further in the sticky threads that glued her body to the web, except for one arm that had fallen limply across her belly. Part of one of Anakin’s legs had fallen bent at the knee, but otherwise he too was completely trapped in the purella’s deadly snare. Anakin had an idea. If he and Tahiri were glued to the sticky black threads, why couldn’t the spider be caught in her own web? He’d watched the purella navigate through the web, careful not to touch any of its threads with her bristles.

What if he and Tahiri could make the creature lose her balance, topple into her own trap? He looked over at the purella, folded in the corner of the web. Her glowing orange eyes were fixed on them. If only they could topple the immense spider onto her back, where thick red bristles rose.

"Tahiri, can you rock the web without getting yourself stuck any more than you already are?" Anakin breathed out of the side of his mouth.

"What do you have in mind?" Tahiri murmured back.

"We've got to try to trap that thing in its own web," Anakin said softly.

Tahiri turned her head minutely and met Anakin's ice blue eyes with determined green ones. Slowly, Tahiri raised her right arm and began to pump it up and down. The purella watched her movements, but didn't rise. Tahiri pumped harder, and the web began to shake. At the same time, Anakin pushed with his left foot, the joint of his free knee hitching up and down. They worked together, and the web began to rock. As it moved, the Jedi candidates pumped their free limbs harder, bouncing the web up and down. The purella rose. Her prey was beginning to struggle, to bind themselves in her snare.

The quivers in the lines drew her toward them, as a spider is always drawn to the tremors of prey in her web. She moved slowly, keeping her delicate balance within the strands of her web.

"She's coming!" Tahiri cried.

"Keep bouncing the web," Anakin replied. He pounded his foot against the strands. The web was now steadily rocking. The purella paused, unaccustomed to so much motion within her web, to struggles of prey that lasted so long. Her body rose and fell as Anakin and Tahiri pressured the web into waves. Then the spider began to move forward again, the hairless base of her legs dancing through the gummy strands until she stopped, less than a half meter from her prey.

"Anakin, it's not working!" Tahiri cried in terror.

The purella fixed her with gleaming orange eyes. It was poised to attack once again, jaws open wide, thick yellow saliva dripping in anticipation. Anakin stared beyond the creature, up into the recesses of the den. The rock above him was at least eight meters away.

Nancy Richardson

“Use the Force to lift the web!” Anakin cried to Tahiri. He closed his eyes and focused on the energy field generated by all living things. Focused on the web, the air, the form of the purella, and his own body. In his mind he was one with the energy field, using it to cause the web to rise like an immense tidal wave. Anakin felt himself lifting, so high he imagined his body might smash into the rocks far above the web.

“Drop, now!” Anakin yelled to his friend. He pushed with his mind, and felt his body plummeting down, down, down, until he thought he might be swallowed up in the belly of the mountain. Anakin’s eyes flew open. He felt the web rising again from his and Tahiri’s efforts, falling and rising, and falling again. It was rebounding so quickly that his stomach rolled with nausea and his vision came in sharp flashes.

“Anakin, I think we did it!” Tahiri cried into the whirlwind. Anakin tore his eyes from the rocks above, which ebbed and flowed before his vision. A searing stab of fear shot through his belly. Where was the spider? Had she leapt safely from the web? Was she now calmly waiting on the walls of the den for the strands to stop rising? Then he saw her. The motion of the web had thrown the spider into the center of her own deadly snare. She’d landed on the bristles of her back, her red underbelly exposed to the air.

The creature writhed and twisted, trying to escape from the gumminess of her threads. As she struggled, the web wrapped around her spastic legs, tightening until their only movement came in twitches. Anakin could see one of the spider’s glowing orange eyes, and he didn’t have to use the Force to sense the creature’s rage. The web slowly came to rest, stuck to the lower rocks.

“We need to figure out a way to unstick ourselves,” Anakin said to Tahiri. Although they hadn’t become further ensnared in the web as it had rocked, both of them were still firmly glued down.

“Any ideas, Tahiri?” Anakin asked.

"How about this?" Tahiri said with a grin as she reached into her jumpsuit and pulled out her multitool. With a click, she snapped out the knife she'd used to cut down her trico filter. Using her free arm, she carefully began to cut around her body, and when she was free enough, she leaned over and began to cut through the thick strands around Anakin. Then she handed the blade to her friend so that he could cut around his other side, then lean back to cut the places around her body that she couldn't reach without risking sticking herself on the web. It was slow, tricky work, but a half hour later, Anakin cut the last thread that held them in the web.

They dangled for a split second, then dropped the short distance to the rocks below. Anakin looked up at the purella. Her orange eyes glowered in rage, but she didn't move. The spider was completely stuck in her own web.

"Let's get out of here, Tahiri," Anakin said softly.

The Jedi candidates climbed up the rocks and through the narrow crevice that the purella had carried them through earlier. As they left the spider's dwelling, they were swallowed up by the darkness of the passageway. Tahiri reached through the gloom to find Anakin's hand.

"Don't worry," Anakin said in the darkness, "I remember the way out."

He gave Tahiri's hand a squeeze, then led her through the steep tunnel. They walked softly, both worried that another purella might find them. But they managed to reach the top of the lower tunnel without encountering an orange-eyed predator. Still, they weren't prepared for what awaited them as they rounded the corner.

Chapter Fourteen

Tahiri screamed as her body brushed against the thing at the top of the tunnel. It was warm, and alive, and she felt frustration and fear rise in her belly. Enough was enough; she was too tired and sore to defend herself against another attack.

“Don’t strike,” a soft voice cried. It was Sannah. She had returned to the lower tunnel. Sannah lit her trico torch, and Anakin and Tahiri saw the Melodie in its golden light. Her yellow eyes were large and scared.

“I couldn’t leave,” she began, nervously twisting her straight brown hair around pale fingers. “I had to know that you were all right.”

“Let’s get out of here,” Anakin said urgently.

Sannah nodded, then began to lead the Jedi candidates back to the middle passage of the mountain. She stopped once, frozen as she listened to the soft scratching of raith claws overhead. But the creatures didn’t sense the three children, and after the rodents had passed Sannah moved forward.

Soon they reached the middle passageway, where morning light lazily drifted through cracks and holes in the mountain. Here the tunnel divided in two directions. One went back to Lyric’s world, the other led up to the portal of Sistra and the brown green tundra of the moon.

STAR WARS: Lyric's World

"We know the way from here," Anakin said softly. "Will you be safe? Or do you want us to take you back to your people before we leave?" Anakin asked.

"No," Sannah replied.

"No you won't be safe, or no you don't want us to go back with you?" Tahiri asked the girl.

"No, I don't want to go back to my world," Sannah said in a quavering voice, her yellow eyes fixed on the two Jedi candidates.

"What do you mean?" Anakin asked.

"I want to go with you," Sannah replied evenly. "I want to study at the Jedi academy, learn about the Force, and develop the skills I need to help protect my people."

"We can't take you with us," Anakin gently explained. "We're not Jedi Knights; we don't have the authority to bring anyone to the academy. Only Luke Skywalker and the other Jedi can do that."

"Why?" Sannah said.

"Yes, why?" Tahiri echoed, as she mulled over the idea.

"Tahiri," Anakin said in exasperation, "you know we can't just bring Sannah back to Yavin 4!"

"But you saw the way she fought the raith," Tahiri replied. "She's sensitive to the Force-I can feel it, Anakin!"

"You've seen what the predators on this planet do to my people," Sannah said as she met Anakin's ice blue eyes. "The children are defenseless. For every avril we successfully fight off, there is another that steals two of us away. For every raith we spear, five more devour our eggs. And judging from the time it took you to leave the lower passage, and the tears in your jumpsuit, you've seen the strength of the purella. We cannot fight them at all!" Sannah cried. "It is not in anger that I ask you to take me," Sannah said, steadying her voice. "Though controlling my fury is something I will have to learn. Take me because I feel the thing you call the Force. Take me because I will pledge myself to the peace and knowledge of the Jedi, and to the use of the Force not in anger, but only only in defense."

Nancy Richardson

“Do the elders know that you want to leave with us and attend the academy?” Tahiri asked. They couldn’t take the girl with them without the elder Melodies’s permission.

“Yes,” Sannah replied. “I leave with their blessing. Especially Lyric’s.”

“If Luke Skywalker doesn’t feel you are strong in the Force, you’ll probably be returned to Yavin 8,” Anakin said slowly.

“I’ll take that risk,” Sannah replied. “I’m only nine years old. If I am permitted to stay until my changing ceremony, I’ll return with the skills to help. And regardless of Luke Skywalker’s decision, at least I will have tried to help my people.”

Anakin turned toward the portal.

“Come on, then,” he called over his shoulder to Sannah.

Tahiri grinned at the girl and grabbed her hand. The three children emerged from Sistra into the early-morning sunlight. They paused on the purple rocks and breathed in the fresh air of hope. Tahiri, Anakin, and Sannah climbed down Sistra quickly. Anakin hoped that Old Peckhum had returned with the supply ship; he and Tahiri were too tired for another battle. Moments later, his hopes were answered as the longhaired old courier raced toward the children.

“I’ve been searching all night for you!” Peckhum cried, his hands wrapped around an old-fashioned blaster rifle. “I couldn’t find the portal to Lyric’s world in the mountains. Where have you been—I was so worried!” He didn’t pause to wait for an answer. “You look terrible,” he said as he studied Tahiri’s and Anakin’s torn, dirt-covered clothing. “Are you all right? And who’s this?” He gestured toward Sannah.

“We’re fine,” Anakin assured the frantic pilot.

“This is Sannah,” Tahiri added. “She’s coming back to Yavin 4 with us.”

Peckhum was too relieved to argue with them. All he wanted to do was get safely back to the Jedi academy. No more baby-sitting for him! The children and the courier began walking toward the shuttle. They did not encounter any raiths or reels as

STAR WARS: Lyric's World

they traveled. And, when they heard the distant shriek of an avril as they boarded, Anakin smiled at its fierce, though strangely beautiful, cry.

Chapter Fifteen

Sannah had never been on a shuttle. She sat next to Peckhum and stared out the window as her world shrank from view and the shuttle was engulfed by the evening skies. Anakin could hear her questions drift back from the front of the craft, and visions of Lyric, who had been in the same seat only yesterday, swam through his mind. He wondered if he'd ever see her red ringlets, glistening pink tail fin, and gentle yellow eyes again. He hoped Lyric would be happy in the crystal waters of her world.

And what about Sannah?

Anakin hoped that Uncle Luke would allow the girl to study at the academy. The young Melodie was sensitive to the Force. He had felt the strength in her, and so had Tahiri.

"Do you think Master Luke will be angry at us for bringing her?" Tahiri asked with a nervous nod toward Sannah.

"I'm not sure," Anakin replied. He, too, felt his stomach tying itself in knots.

They made a brief stop to deliver Peckhum's supplies to another cargo ship that circled Yavin, waiting for the *Lightning Rod*. Then, the pilot headed their shuttle back to Yavin 4. It was all Anakin could do to make himself stand up and move toward the door when the ship had landed. A jolt of terror ran through him. If Sannah told Uncle Luke about the carvings he and Tahiri

had risked their lives to find in the lower tunnel of Sistra, his uncle would want to know why. And there was no way he could lie to Luke Skywalker. Anakin would be forced to tell him about the messages the Massassi had left, and the golden globe in the Palace of the Woolamander.

If that happened, the prophesy that the Jedi Master Ikrit had foretold would occur: the globe would shatter into a thousand pieces of crystal and the children trapped within its glittering sands would be lost.

"Sannah," Anakin called urgently. The Melodie walked back to him and Tahiri. "I need to ask you a favor."

"Anything," Sannah instantly replied.

Anakin steadied his voice.

"Sannah, I need you to promise not to mention the strange carvings in the rocks of Sistra to Luke Skywalker," Anakin said. "Please don't tell him that Tahiri and I risked our lives to read the carvings in the lower tunnel. If you do, countless beings will be in grave danger."

"I would never want to get you into any trouble," Sannah said softly. "I promise."

"Thank you, Sannah," Anakin said with relief. "Now please wait inside the shuttle until we tell Uncle Luke that we brought you." Anakin didn't want to spring Sannah on his uncle without an explanation.

Sannah nodded and shrank back from the shuttle door as it hissed open. As he watched the door open, Luke Skywalker was not pleased. He was dismayed to see his nephew and Tahiri emerge bruised and battered. Both students were covered with streaks of purple dirt, and their orange academy jumpsuits were torn. In addition, thick strands of what looked like spider webbing hung from the leg of Anakin's jumpsuit, and blue-green algae was dried to the tops of Tahiri's bare feet.

"Hi, Uncle Luke," Anakin said with a little smile.

Nancy Richardson

“Welcome home,” Luke Skywalker said in a voice ringing with concern. “You are both a mess. What happened to you on Yavin 8?”

“We ran into some pretty nasty creatures,” Tahiri said with a nervous grin. “But Lyric’s changing was a success.”

“I want both of you to see the medical droid about your wounds,” Luke Skywalker solemnly instructed as he wrapped his arms around Anakin’s and Tahiri’s shoulders and drew them away from the shuttle. “We’ll discuss your adventures after I’m sure you’re all right. And I may have a word with Peckhum.”

“Er, Uncle Luke, there’s something we need to talk about before we go to see the medical droid,” Anakin said nervously.

Luke Skywalker turned to face his nephew.

“Can’t it wait?” he inquired.

“Well, it’s not exactly an it,” Anakin began. “It’s a she. Her name is Sannah. She’s a Melodie we met on Yavin 8.... I think she’s sensitive to the Force,” Anakin continued weakly, embarrassed to even suggest to his uncle that he thought he could recognize strength in the Force when he was only a Jedi candidate.

“Tell me about her,” Luke Skywalker said.

“She fought a raith,” Tahiri began. “That’s a giant black, hairy rodent with jagged teeth. She did it using the Force—I know she did because I felt it. She wants to study at the academy so she can learn to protect the Melodie children from the predators on her moon,” Tahiri went on without taking a breath.

“There’s so many of them - avrils, raiths, and reels, and enormous red-bristled spiders named purellas which, believe me, are vicious.” Then Tahiri, too, faltered before Luke’s silence and the calm of his pale blue eyes.

“She’s in the shuttle,” she finally murmured.

Sannah appeared in the doorway of the shiny craft, then slowly came down the ramp. The rustling of her light green tunic was the only sound that broke the silence of Luke Skywalker’s

stare. She approached the Jedi Master, her large yellow eyes never leaving his face.

“Welcome to the Jedi academy, Sannah,” Luke said when the young Melodie reached him. “We have a lot to discuss. Anakin, Tahiri, please go see the medic. I’ll take care of your friend,” Luke instructed.

Tahiri and Anakin didn’t want to leave Sannah. But there was no disobeying the stern note in Luke’s voice. They both turned and left the hangar.

“Do you think Master Luke will let her stay?” Tahiri whispered as they headed to the turbolift that would take them to the upper levels of the Great Temple.

“I hope so, Tahiri,” Anakin replied. “But I just don’t know.”

Chapter Sixteen

Anakin and Tahiri hunched over several sheets of paper on the stone floor of Anakin's room. They'd returned from the academy medical droid only a short while before. She'd cleaned their cuts and bandaged Tahiri's ribs. Tahiri had been right: the reel that had tried to crush her had cracked one of them. The medical droid had also taken a sample of their blood to make sure the purella's venom had left their systems. It had. And, except for the cuts and a few bruises, she said the two Jedi candidates were fine.

It was late afternoon, and after a shower and a change of clothing Tahiri had gone to Anakin's room. Now both candidates sat hard at work, trying to decipher the symbols left by the Massassi.

"Anakin, are you done writing down the message from the lower tunnel of Sistra?" Tahiri asked impatiently.

"Almost," Anakin said, his eyes closed as he recalled the carvings and scribbled them down. Tahiri studied the symbols from the Palace of the Woolamander. She desperately hoped that they'd be able to decipher them from the translation Aragon had recalled of the carvings on Yavin 8. To do so would mean breaking down the carvings from the lower tunnel of Sistra and matching each symbol to the words Aragon had remembered.

STAR WARS: Lyric's World

Tahiri fervently hoped that the elder Melodie's memory hadn't been faulty. If it had, they wouldn't be able to translate the carvings in the palace. And they would not be able to help the children trapped within the golden globe.

Tahiri looked at another sheet of paper. On it were the words Aragon had spoken. Words that Anakin had written down moments ago, as if Aragon's voice still echoed in his head.

"Peace to all. We are the Massassi. We beg the ones who read this message to travel to the fourth moon. Break the curse that the evil Jedi Knight Exar Kun made to enslave the Massassi and imprison our children. We cannot break the curse ourselves, but will leave a message in our palace to help those who can."

Tahiri had just finished reading when there was a soft knock on Anakin's door.

"Just a minute," Anakin called as he scrambled to hide the sheets of paper he and Tahiri were working on. "Come," he called.

The door opened and Luke Skywalker stood looking at the two candidates.

"The medical droid told me that your wounds have been treated," Master Luke said as he moved to sit on a stone chair. "Anakin, it is lucky that you weren't badly hurt, or your mother would have had my head," Luke said sternly. "I'm very glad that you both are safe and back at the academy."

Anakin heard the note of concern in his uncle's voice. Leia Organa Solo was Uncle Luke's sister, and his mother had entrusted her youngest son to Luke Skywalker's care. There was no way Uncle Luke would accept any unnecessary actions on his or Tahiri's part that would have put them in danger. If he learned that either had been foolhardy on Yavin 8, Luke Skywalker would not only be displeased, but they might be sent home. Anakin desperately hoped that Sannah hadn't mentioned the carvings.

"I've heard from Sannah that you fought bravely to protect the Melodies from predators," Luke Skywalker continued. "That

Nancy Richardson

you used the Force to protect your friend, her people, and yourselves.”

Luke Skywalker studied Anakin’s young face. He hoped his nephew understood the gravity of the situation he’d survived. “I’m pleased that Lyric survived the changing and is now an elder,” Master Luke continued. “However, we must discuss Sannah.”

Anakin’s heart sank. Sannah was being sent home.

“We’re sorry, Uncle Luke,” he began. “It’s just that we couldn’t deny her the chance to help her people-“

“Don’t apologize,” Luke Skywalker interrupted. “It’s true that the Melodies on Yavin 8 are unable to protect themselves well from the predators that roam their moon. That’s one of the reasons that Tionne brought Lyric to the academy. Even though Lyric was close to the time of changing, Tionne recognized that she was strong in the Force. We both hoped to teach Lyric enough so that she could return to her moon and help the Melodies. And I think we were successful. Lyric will begin to seek those of her people who are sensitive to the Force, and to help them understand the Force. She herself understands it deeply, even though her time here was short. Sannah’s time with us will be longer.”

“Did you just say what I think you said?” Tahiri cried.

Before Luke Skywalker could answer, Sannah appeared in the doorway in an orange academy jumpsuit. Tahiri leapt toward her new friend and enfolded her in a hug.

“You were right-she is strong in the Force,” Luke Skywalker said. He embraced the three Jedi candidates before he strode from the room and left them alone. Anakin turned toward Sannah.

“Welcome to the academy,” he said softly.

“Thank you,” Sannah replied with an enormous smile. “Thank you for bringing me here. I’ve got to go see the Jedi Knight Tionne now,” she explained. “She’s going to show me where my room is and tell me more about the academy.”

Sannah turned to leave Anakin's room.

"By the way," she said over her shoulder. "I didn't mention the carvings in the lower tunnel to Master Luke. Your secret is safe with me." Anakin and Tahiri exchanged a relieved look.

"Let's get back to work," Anakin said when Sannah had left. He pulled out the papers and started writing symbols down in the place he'd left off. A few more lines and he'd be finished. Then he and Tahiri could begin matching symbols to letters. Once they knew what letter each symbol stood for, they could match them to the words carved in the Palace of the Woolamander. Then, perhaps, they could solve the riddle that enshrouded the globe.

Chapter Seventeen

It was hard work. Matching symbols to letters, letters to words. Anakin felt his eyesight beginning to blur. Hours passed and night blanketed the Great Temple. Anakin and Tahiri hadn't slept since they'd returned to the Jedi academy. Anakin had written down the symbols from deep within Sistra. He'd written down Aragon's words. But so far, they weren't having any luck matching symbols to letters. It just didn't make any sense. No matter what they tried, they ended up with gibberish.

"We have to get some sleep," Anakin finally stated. "Let's try one more time,"

Tahiri coaxed.

"We've got to be doing something wrong." She stared at the lines before her tired eyes. Then tried to insert letters for symbols from left to right, in the pattern of Basic. She even tried to scramble the symbols, replacing first and third letters to see if they made more sense. Nothing.

"We're missing something," Tahiri grumbled.

"It's no use," Anakin sighed. "The Massassi were a different race than we are. They used symbols, but that doesn't mean that each stood for one letter like it does in Basic. There's an infinite number of possibilities to translate. It's going to take us weeks, months, maybe years!" he cried in exasperation.

Anakin was so caught up in his frustration that he didn't hear the door to his room quietly open.

"I can't sleep," Sannah whispered from the entrance.

Anakin's head snapped up and Tahiri whirled around to face the door.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you." Sannah apologized. "It's just that it's hard to sleep in a new place..."

"It's okay, Sannah," Tahiri said gently as she helped Anakin gather the crumpled papers before them. One sheet dropped from her grasp and wafted gently through the air. She watched as it floated—a white bird borne on the winds of chance.

The paper landed, faceup, by Sannah's bare feet. Sannah bent over and picked up the sheet. She moved forward to hand it back to Tahiri.

"What is this?" she asked.

"It's just something Aragon told us," Anakin explained as he reached for the paper. Sannah drew it back toward her and curiously studied the scribbles of Basic.

Finally, a look of understanding spread across her fine features. Sannah read out loud the words "Peace to all." Then, she giggled.

"What's so funny?" Tahiri asked. "It's just that I've never seen Basic written so strangely," Sannah replied.

"What do you mean?" Anakin asked intently. "Well, you've lined the letters up so that Aragon's words run from left to right," Sannah explained. "But on Yavin 8, we spell our words from top to bottom."

Sannah crouched by Anakin and took the writing tool from his hand. She turned the sheet over and scribbled one word of Aragon's message down. Then she held the sheet up for Anakin and Tahiri. P E A C E the letters read. Anakin's ice blue eyes met Tahiri's blazing green ones. The message they exchanged was clear—This is it!

"I'll walk you back to your room and sit with you until you fall asleep," Tahiri offered Sannah as she took the paper from the girl

Nancy Richardson

and casually passed it down to Anakin. Then she took Sannah's hand.

"I had trouble sleeping my first night, too," she said kindly. Her words drifted softly through the hallway as she led Sannah back to her room. Anakin spread his papers back out and began to match symbols to letters. He turned when he heard a soft sound behind him.

The Jedi Master Ikrit had appeared on his window ledge. The Master sat silently, watching Anakin with round brown eyes. The young Jedi turned back to his work. It makes sense, Anakin thought to himself. The Massassi must have learned the pattern that the Melodies wrote in, and assumed that others would write in the same way. That was why they carved their symbols vertically instead of horizontally, left to right. Anakin watched the words of the ancient Massassi from the Palace of the Woolamander come to life beneath his writing tool. By the time Tahiri had returned to his room, he was finished with the translation. "Did it work?" Tahiri asked breathlessly as she slipped into the stone chair across from her friend. Anakin didn't answer. Instead he held up the sheet before him and began to read out loud.

"Peace to all. We are the Massassi. Our children have been imprisoned by the evil Jedi Knight Exar Kun. Locked deep within this palace, hidden in the glittering sands of a golden globe, they await. The crystal that holds them prisoner can only be unlocked by children, strong in the Force and dedicated to the battle of good over evil. If you are the ones, enter the globe and lead our children to freedom."

"We're the ones, aren't we?" Tahiri whispered.

"Yes," Anakin replied, his ice blue eyes flashing. "We're the ones."

On the window ledge, Ikrit watched. The Force was strong in these two children, he knew. But he knew, too, of the dangers that lay ahead.

Book Three
Promises

PROLOGUE

There had been only one other day in Sliven's life when he could remember being afraid. It was the day he had fought his tribe to save the girl's life. The Tusken Raiders of Tatooine had been enraged that their leader, the fierce Sliven, would risk his own life to protect a human child.

It was not their way, Sliven's way, they'd growled and snarled. The Raiders were a violent, aggressive race that inhabited the sweltering deserts of Tatooine. They were nomads, roaming the desert wrapped head to toe in strips of white cloth, breathing through masks, and wearing heavy goggles to ward off the sand that whipped across their barren land. And when they needed precious water and food sometimes they stole it. Through stealth, or through violence. It didn't matter to them. Survival was their only rule. The tribe's survival.

They would not have searched for Sliven after the battle with a band of smugglers if he had not been their leader. Even then, they only searched for him because they couldn't name a new leader if the old one still lived. They had to be certain of his death. This Sliven knew, just as he knew how to travel through sandstorms, where the krayt dragons roamed, and the scent of a womp rat. They had come to find him dead, but he was alive.

Nancy Richardson

Sliven watched the fiery twin suns of Tatooine slide behind the Jundland Wastes. He'd spent his life in this hot canyon and mesa region. A life filled with yellow sand, struggle, survival at all costs. Maybe if he hadn't known the girl's parents. If he hadn't come to them with the last of his life slipping from his body, been nursed back to health, lived in their home, ate with their small family of three. But it had happened, and it had changed him. And the result? He was still the same fierce Raider in appearance, but there was a part inside of him, a soft place, the place where his feelings for the girl lived.

The others had wanted to leave her there. To leave her to die in the empty moisture farm. It was at that moment, when Sliven had recognized that he would fight with his life to save the child, that he felt fear. The idea of dying for another being, not even one of his own race, a human infant, was strange to him. He had not expected the blonde-headed snip of life that giggled and smiled at his savage image to affect him more than the buzzing of black flies over the carcass of a bantha. But it had; she had.

And so he'd made a bargain. A promise that involved both her life and his own, and that would not be made known to the girl until the time came. If it went unfulfilled, Sliven would be killed. If the girl chose to do what needed to be done, she would be rewarded with the story of her family. A history that had been kept from her by the Raiders as part of the bargain. Sliven knew she might agree to try just to learn her history, But if she failed, she would die, and so would he.

The years have passed in the sigh of a bantha, Sliven thought. The child had been taken into the tribe, taught to hunt and fight, and to survive in the desert. He'd taught her those things, masking his concern behind the grunts and growls of his language. A language he'd taught her when she was only three years old, along with Basic, which he'd learned during his stay with her parents.

She might survive, Sliven thought. Still, part of him hoped that she wouldn't return to Tatooine. That she would stay with

the Jedi who had discovered and taken her from the tribe to study at the Jedi academy on Yavin 4. She was strong in the Force, they'd explained to him. They wanted to train her to become a Jedi Knight. Sliven had agreed, for two reasons. First, he understood all too well what the leader of the Jedi, Master Luke Skywalker, and the Jedi Knight, Tionne, recognized. After all, he'd spent several months with the girl's parents. They, too, had a strange power within them, and unusual abilities. Second, Sliven knew that the girl had to spend time away from the tribe, see other beings and places, in order to decide whether she wanted to spend the rest of her life as a Tusken Raider. To decide whether or not she belonged.

Sliven knew that the promise he had made years earlier had to be denied or fulfilled soon, so he'd made a deal with the child. The girl could go to Yavin 4 if she returned to her tribe in six months. He'd explained to the Jedi Master that in half a year Tahiri had to make a decision as to whether to return to her tribe or to stay on at the academy. If she chose to stay at the academy, she would forever lose the tribe. And she had to come back to her home planet, Tatooine, to say what she decided. Skywalker understood, and the girl had agreed.

But would she come? And if she did, would she choose to fulfill the promise? Sliven wasn't certain. He grunted deeply and sat unmoving in the stillness of the desert night. If he had loved the girl when she was only an infant, what he felt now threatened to tear his battered heart apart beneath its covering of ragged cloth. I want her to remain with the tribe, to watch her grow up as I grow old. But I don't know if she belongs with us,

with me. And I want to live, Sliven thought in frustration, for I'm still strong enough, violent enough, to lead my people.

Sliven looked up to the night sky, to the stars which would guide her back to him. "Do not come back, my daughter," he called softly. "Do not come home, Tahiri."

Chapter One

The figure loomed above him. Anakin tried to shield his eyes from the brilliant glare of the golden globe. Tried to see the being whose body was outlined with a shimmering blue line.

“Young Anakin Solo,” a voice whispered, a hand beckoned.

Anakin followed the glow of the being away from the globe. As he walked, he felt darkness pulling at the loose cloth of his orange jumpsuit. Fear fluttered in his belly, but he followed, using the Force to calm the racing of his heart. The figure stopped before carvings in the crumbling stone walls of the ancient Massassi Palace of the Woolamander. The hand flickered with pale blue sparks as it swept over the message. Anakin’s eyes scanned the symbols. He and Tahiri had finally been able to read them after returning from Yavin 8.

Anakin read their message out loud.

“Peace to all. We are the Massassi. Our children have been imprisoned by the evil Jedi Knight Exar Kun. Locked deep within this palace, hidden in the glittering sands of a golden globe, they await. The crystal that holds them prisoner can only be unlocked by children, strong in the Force and dedicated to the battle of good over evil. If you are the ones, enter the globe and lead our children to freedom.”

Nancy Richardson

The figure nodded, then fell to its knees before Anakin, head dropped. Anakin sensed its torment.

“Tahiri and I are the ones,” he heard himself say. “Don’t be afraid-we’ll fight this battle.”

The pale blue line around the figure began to spark and flicker until it faded into the darkness. The being still knelt before Anakin, unmoving. Anakin bent down and reached out his hand. The figure slowly lifted its black hooded head and let out a roar filled with hatred and darkness. Anakin leapt away as it began to laugh in rolls of icy thunder. Eyes the color of blue gray burning coals fixed upon Anakin, held him with their power. The figure rose, unfolding into a creature twice its original size.

It continued to laugh, and Anakin felt swallowed by the darkness of its hollow cries. He ran, not knowing which way he traveled in the cavity of the palace. The black-robed being followed, howling in mad glee. Anakin reached the secret room that housed the golden globe he and Tahiri had discovered months earlier.

They had instantly sensed its evil, and pledged to understand, unlock, and free the prisoners that cried from its core. His back to the globe, Anakin watched as the black-robed figure approached, once again fixing him with those burning eyes. He backed up until he couldn’t move any farther without touching the globe. There was a powerful field around the crystal sphere. Tahiri had tried to touch it and had been thrown against the stone walls of the room. Anakin wasn’t going to make the same mistake. He held his ground.

“I’m going to fight you,” Anakin shouted. “Tahiri and I will use the Force to break the evil curse. We’re the ones the Massassi wrote about: `strong in the Force and dedicated to the battle of good over evil’! You can’t stop us-“

“Why would I want to stop you, boy?” the figure laughed. “I am you!”

The creature threw back its hood, and Anakin stifled a scream that welled up from the very core of his being and threatened to

escape his trembling lips. He stood looking at his own face. Only his eyes were different. Instead of being a pure ice blue, they had been replaced with burning gray coals that smoked and sparked.

"Didn't you hear me, boy?" the figure snarled. "I'm you, you fool. You knew, you've always known that you were meant to serve the dark side - to use the Force for evil. It's in your blood. Your grandfather served us well, helped us defeat the Jedi Knights. You were named after him, after Anakin Skywalker who became Darth Vader. Stop fighting us and embrace the dark side...."

"It won't work," Anakin said calmly, summoning up the Force to control himself. "I know who you are."

The figure hissed, recoiling from the power in Anakin's voice.

"You're a follower of Exar Kun, the evil Jedi Knight who enslaved the Massassi race thousands of years ago by imprisoning its children in the golden globe. You're not me, and you never will be," Anakin went on, walking toward the robed figure. "Tahiri and I are going to fight you, and break the curse of the golden globe."

"This is not over, young Anakin Solo," the figure said angrily. Then its form began to waver in the golden light of the globe. Moments later, it had completely disappeared. Anakin turned back toward the globe. He listened to the cries of the children from inside its swirling sands. Soon, he thought. Soon Tahiri and I will come to this place and attempt to enter the globe and lead you to freedom.

"Soon, soon, soon..."

"Soon what?" Tahiri asked as she shook her best friend awake. "Anakin, wake up, you've been dreaming."

Anakin stared groggily up at Tahiri. Her green eyes were impatient, and he struggled to sit up.

"What time is it?" he asked.

"Time for us to have a serious talk," Tahiri replied. "We've got a problem. I've been called to see Master Luke Skywalker. And I know why. I've been at the Jedi academy for six months,

Nancy Richardson

and it's time for me to make my decision about whether or not to return to my tribe or remain here."

"I thought you'd already decided to stay," Anakin said. Not only was Tahiri his best friend, but they were a team. A team pledged to solve the riddle of the globe.

"I have," Tahiri replied. "But it's not that simple. Master Luke and I agreed with Sliven, the leader of my tribe, that I'd return to Tatooine to make my decision. I've got to figure out a way to persuade Master Luke not to make me return. Right?" Tahiri didn't wait for a reply. "I mean, we've finally translated the ancient symbols in the Palace of the Woolamander. It's time to enter the globe-I can't go to Tatooine now! Aren't you going to say something?" Tahiri asked.

"I was just waiting for you to run out of breath," Anakin explained. He swept his long brown bangs out of his eyes and met Tahiri's questioning look. "I don't think it's going to be as easy as you think," he offered. "If you gave your word, and Uncle Luke did too, he's going to want you to return to Tatooine."

"I'll take care of it," Tahiri said. "Don't worry, I'm not going anywhere." With that, she strode out of the room to meet Luke Skywalker in the Grand Audience Chamber.

Anakin felt a sense of unease as his friend left. His dream had left him feeling anxious. The idea that someone might know about him and Tahiri, and their plans to enter the globe, hadn't occurred to him before. If Kun's evil followers knew about them, it would mean that the battle in the depths of the Palace of the Woolamander would be all the more difficult. He thought about that first time he and Tahiri had found the palace, They'd snuck out of the academy and rafted the river. A storm had forced them to abandon their raft and seek shelter. They'd found the palace, its strange carvings, and then a hidden spiral stairway that led deep into the crumbling site. As they'd descended, evil had coated the stones like thick black fungi, and dark whispers and threats had streamed through the dank air.

And then they'd seen golden glitter, speckled along the walls and seeping from behind a secret doorway. Anakin shook off the memory. Tahiri's right, I've got to stop daydreaming and focus on what's happening now. Anakin hoped that Tahiri would be able to persuade Uncle Luke to let her remain on Yavin 4 while making her decision. The time had come to break the curse. A moment of worry reached out with fluttering yellow fingers and touched Anakin's mind.

We are the ones, he thought. But are we strong enough to enter the globe?

Chapter Two

Luke Skywalker studied the look of defiance. Green eyes flashed, and white blonde hair surrounded a stubborn nine-year-old face. Luke's blue eyes didn't falter as he waited for the child to speak. It would not be long. Tahiri was rarely lost for words. Luke thought about the time she and his nephew, Anakin Solo, had snuck away from the Jedi academy. They'd returned to the Great Temple in the middle of the night. Tired and dirty, Tahiri had immediately begun chattering, trying to take all the blame for the adventure, trying to keep Luke's punishment from extending to Anakin. What Luke hadn't told either of them was that they were two of the most promising students he'd ever seen. There was no way he would expel either student. They would make great Jedi Knights one day-if they could keep out of trouble long enough to learn to use the Force.

Trouble seemed to find Tahiri and Anakin. Only last week they'd returned bruised and battered from Yavin 8, where they'd gone to help another candidate, a Melodie named Lyric, survive her changing ceremony. While on Yavin 8, the two candidates had fought giant black rodents, vicious snakes, and a red-bristled spider that trapped its prey in thick black webs and consumed it alive. Luke Skywalker believed that experience was the best

teacher in the use of the Force, but Anakin and Tahiri always rushed headlong into dangerous situations.

That worried Luke. Still, their ability to use the Force to control, alter, and manipulate the energy field generated by all living things was impressive.

"I won't go," Tahiri said defiantly, stamping her bare foot down on the cool stones of the Great Temple. She'd refused to wear shoes since she'd come to Yavin 4. On her home planet Tatooine, gritty sand and a burning-hot desert were a daily reality, and foot coverings a necessity.

"You won't make me go," Tahiri said again, although this time her voice faltered.

"You're right," Luke replied. He moved to the large open window in the Grand Audience Chamber. Beneath him the lush jungles of Yavin 4 steamed in the midday sun. Majestic Massassi trees, their bark a rich purplish brown, reached up toward the pyramid-shaped Great Temple. The temple was the home of future Jedi Knights, beings from across the galaxy who studied at the academy in order to one day use the Force for peace and knowledge, and in the battle against evil.

Tahiri walked over to Master Luke and stood beside his brown-robed form. She stared down at the jungle, at the greens, purples, and reds that made up a landscape she'd once dreamed about. Dreamed of in the heat and endless sand of her planet. Luke Skywalker understood Tahiri's frustration. He, too, was originally from Tatooine. He'd spent eighteen years working on his uncle and aunt's moisture farm. The boredom had threatened to suffocate him. But there had been something else, too.

"I never knew my father," Master Luke said softly to his student. "At least not the man he was before he turned to the dark side to serve the evil emperor Palpatine. I never knew my father, Anakin Skywalker, when he was a Jedi Knight, determined to use the Force for good. And when I finally met what he'd become, Darth Vader, it was too late. It's true that he did turn

Nancy Richardson

from evil in his last moments, but there wasn't time for us to develop a relationship before he died."

Luke paused for a moment.

"Do you understand what I'm saying to you?" he asked Tahiri.

"You were an orphan in a way, too," Tahiri began slowly. "But the difference is that I won't ever have the chance to meet either of my parents. The Tusken Raiders said they're both dead."

"What about Sliven?" Luke Skywalker asked.

"He's the leader of my tribe," Tahiri answered evenly.

"Nothing more?" Luke asked.

"I guess he's the only family I'll ever have," Tahiri replied softly. "Returning to Tatooine may be the last chance I'll have to see him."

"You owe that to yourself, and to him," Master Luke said. "Still, it's your decision. I'm certain you'll make the right one." He turned and strode out of the chamber. It's not so simple, little one, he thought as he left. Not so easy to give up the only family, the only father, you've ever known. That in itself will test all of your power, and your ability to control your own inner Force.

And perhaps, just perhaps, your decision to remain at the academy will change. If that happens, we'll lose a promising student. But, as much as this would disturb me, your happiness is more important. Luke took the turbolift down to the hangar. He found the supply ship captain, old Peckhum. Peckhum had just unloaded crates for the academy. Now he was preparing to take a delivery to a planet only hours from Tatooine.

Luke asked Peckhum to prepare his ship for a detour to Tatooine the following morning. When Peckhum asked how many passengers, Luke didn't hesitate.

Three, he replied. There was no way Tahiri would travel home without her best friend, Anakin Solo. And no way that Luke would allow them to go alone. Tatooine was too dangerous a

STAR WARS: Promises

planet. And Luke had a strange feeling that Tahiri's family, the Tusken Raiders, were dangerous as well.

Chapter Three

Anakin watched Tahiri nervously finger the rough sand-colored pendant that hung from her neck. Since they'd boarded the shuttle at the academy and shot into the darkness toward the Outer Rim Territories and the planet Tatooine, Tahiri had been silent. That worried Anakin. His best friend was rarely quiet. For a time, Anakin contented himself with thoughts of the golden globe, and the furry white Jedi Master named Ikrit that he and Tahiri had found sleeping at its base.

Ikrit had discovered the globe over four hundred years ago. He'd immediately sensed that he could not break the curse, so he'd curled up beside the globe to wait for those who could. Although he knew little about the web of evil around the globe, Ikrit had a strong feeling that if an adult tried to free the golden sphere's young prisoners, the globe would shatter into a thousand shards of crystal.

Anakin and Tahiri hadn't told Master Luke about the globe, its curse, or their plans to destroy the evil that had festered in the belly of the Palace of the Woolamander for thousands of years. This was something they wanted to try to handle themselves. Tahiri was still running her small fingers over the pendant. Anakin could make out two rough prints on the surface of the oblong charm. Tahiri felt his eyes, and turned to face him.

"It was given to me by the leader of my tribe," Tahiri offered softly. She held the pendant up for Anakin to see. "There are two thumbprints in its center. Sliven told me years ago that they are my parents' prints."

"He knew your parents?" Anakin asked in surprise.

Tahiri had told him she knew nothing of her family before the Tusken Raiders.

"I can only guess that he did," Tahiri replied. "But other than the pendant and those few words telling me who the thumbprints belonged to, he's never given me another clue as to who my parents were."

"But why not?" Anakin asked.

"I don't know," Tahiri answered. "I used to beg Sliven, really beg him to tell me about my mother and father. He would never answer, although I felt pain in his silence. After a few years, I stopped asking..." Tahiri trailed off.

Anakin sensed his friend's torment, and her fear.

"Tahiri, what are you afraid of?" he asked. "You don't have to go."

"I don't know," Tahiri said softly. "But it's more complicated than that. Sliven knew it would be, and so did Master Luke. Anakin, don't you see - I'm not like you. I don't have a brother and sister, or a mother and father who were heroes of the Rebellion. I don't know who my parents were, or how I ended up with my tribe. All I know is that the Tusken Raiders are the only family I've ever known. The only family I have. If I choose to remain at the academy, I'll lose them forever. I'll truly be an orphan." Tahiri turned to look out the shuttle window, her unseeing eyes filled with tears.

"There's more, isn't there," Anakin asked softly.

"Yes," Tahiri admitted. "I feel so mixed-up right now. I'm about to return to the only home I know. It's a place I hate and love, both at the same time. Just as I hate and love the Tusken Raiders. My life is as confusing to me as the golden globe. Except, unlike with the globe, I don't have any clue about who I

Nancy Richardson

really am. I don't even know if Tahiri is my real name, or just a name given to me by Sliven."

Tahiri paused and gulped for air.

"Anakin, you have a family, a history. Even though being the grandson of Darth Vader frightens you, at least you know where you came from, who you came from. All I have are these two thumbprints. I'm afraid that if I don't return to the Raiders for good, I may never have the chance to find out who I really am. But if I do, I'm afraid I'll discover I'm meant to be something other than a Jedi Knight."

Anakin recognized the look on Tahiri's face. It was the same desperate cry for help he'd seen when, after being tossed from their silver raft, she'd thrashed in the river's water, struggling to survive. The same look she'd worn on Yavin 8 when a reel-a-giant violet-colored snake-had wrapped her in its coils and tried to crush her. The look reminded Anakin of how much they'd been through together. How much they'd learned about themselves, and their strengths in the Force. He'd used the Force to keep Tahiri from drowning in the river, and he'd actually probed within the body of the reel with his mind, to force the creature to release its hold on her. Together they'd even toppled a purella, the giant red-bristled spider with glowing orange eyes that had been poised to devour them, slowly.

And then they'd learned from an elder Melodie on Yavin 8 the information that they'd needed to read the Massassi symbols in the palace and break the curse. But to do that, they had to work together, as a team. Anakin was certain that neither of them was strong enough in the Force to wage the war alone.

"You once told me that no matter who my grandfather was, I was meant to become a Jedi Knight and use the Force for good," Anakin said softly. "The same goes for you. I understand that you want to know your history, but is it as important as the lives of the children trapped inside the golden globe? Only you can know which is more important. But whatever you decide, I'll always be your friend.... Okay?" Anakin said gently.

STAR WARS: Promises

“Okay,” Tahiri said with a nod. Anakin didn’t tell Tahiri that even if she chose to remain on Tatooine, he’d still attempt to break the curse. To fight the good battle, even though he knew in his heart that without Tahiri’s strength he would never leave the depths of the Palace of the Woolamander alive.

“Five minutes to landing,” old Peckhum transmitted back to Anakin and Tahiri.

The Jedi instructor Tionne glanced back to make sure her two charges were seated. Luke Skywalker had sent her to watch over Anakin and Tahiri on Tatooine-to make sure that nothing harmed them. And that Tahiri returned to the Jedi academy, if she wished. Anakin strapped himself in and readied himself to meet Tahiri’s people. But nothing could have prepared him for what lay minutes away, beyond the safety of the shuttle’s cool silver hatch.

Chapter Four

Anakin threw himself in front of Tahiri. Above him, three Tusken Raiders growled, their tall, broad forms masked in strips of white material, their faces covered with gray breath masks and dark round protective goggles. Held high in each of their hands was an axelike metal weapon with a double-edged blade that glinted beneath the harsh twin suns of Tatooine. They moved forward to attack.

“Get back in the shuttle,” Anakin commanded his friend.

Tionne stepped forward, her silver eyes flashing. Anakin could sense the hostility and raw anger that came from the group of Raiders.

“It’s all right,” Tahiri said calmly. “They’re from my tribe.”

Tahiri took a step out from behind Anakin and Tionne and moved toward the Raiders.

“Are you sure?” Anakin asked uncertainly as he watched Tahiri walk forward. The three Raiders parted, and a fourth, who had been hidden behind them, emerged. He, too, held the axelike weapon high, and Anakin tensed. He was ready to spring forward if Tahiri needed him. Tahiri grunted toward the fourth Raider. It was a deep, guttural sound that Anakin had never heard from his friend. The Raider growled back.

“It’s okay, Anakin,” Tahiri said softly without turning away from the Raider. “His name is Sliven, and he’s the leader of my tribe. I’m greeting him and introducing you and Tionne. Neither of you were expected—that’s why the Raiders took a battle stance.”

Anakin nodded, but neither he nor Tionne took their eyes off the Raiders. Sliven moved toward Tahiri, lowering his weapon as he walked. Then he let loose a string of grunts and growls, connected by a dialect Anakin could neither recognize nor understand.

“He wants to know where my robes and foot coverings are,” Tahiri began.

Sliven stared down at the girl, his adoptive daughter, as she gazed up at him. Her green eyes, the color of the water he had hunted all his life, were unreadable. Then she spoke to him, making the harsh language of the Raiders sound soft.

“I just told him that one of the conditions I made when I entered the academy was that I no longer had to wear robes or shoes,” Tahiri told Anakin. Her translation was cut short by several deep barks.

“He says that some things never change, and my stubborn nature is one of them,” Tahiri explained with a grin.

Anakin followed Tahiri and her people away from the shuttle. They’d landed at a special spot in the desert, where Tahiri had been expected. As they walked, Anakin squinted in the bright sunlight to study his surroundings. Endless yellow desert stretched out before him.

Anakin had hoped they’d land in Mos Eisley, Tatooine’s infamous city. Because of its remote location, Mos Eisley was known throughout the galaxy for attracting thieves, pirates, and smugglers. It was there that his father, Han Solo, first met his uncle Luke and the Jedi Master Ben Kenobi. Uncle Luke and Master Kenobi had hired his father to pilot them to Alderaan in his freighter, the *Millennium Falcon*. That was the beginning of adventures that led his father and uncle to rescue his mother,

Nancy Richardson

Princess Leia Organa, from the Death Star and Darth Vader, Anakin thought with pride.

The heat rolled in thick waves over the sand. Anakin felt his jumpsuit beginning to stick to his back as sweat rolled down in time to the beat of his heart. Tahiri walked in front of him, talking to Sliven. The other three Raiders walked to the side, scanning the desert for hidden enemies. Tionne walked in silence, her large eyes never leaving the Raiders. Several times Anakin sensed danger, but the group traveled safely up and down rolling sand dunes. Sliven's deep voice interrupted Anakin's thoughts. The Raider motioned for Anakin and Tahiri to follow him up yet another sand hill.

"Bangor!" Tahiri cried when several large, brown, furry animals came into sight. One of the animals raised his head at the sound of her voice and began to tug at the thick rope that held him to a wooden stake in the sand. Tahiri raced forward and stretched out her arms. The animal bumped his soft brown nose against her side. Tahiri reached up and scratched between his long, spiral horns. Sliven growled beside Anakin.

"He repeats that some things never change," Tahiri translated with a giggle.

Although Sliven's words sounded gruff, Anakin sensed something beneath them, a caring that he hadn't expected. After all, the Sand People, as the Tusken Raiders were also known, were famous for their aggressive, violent nature. They'd been known to attack the settlements of moisture farms on Tatooine, to steal and fight, and many times to kill. In the back of Anakin's mind, he wondered if that wasn't how Tahiri had ended up with these people. Perhaps they had attacked her family's settlement and killed her parents.

Anakin pushed the thought away. It was too gruesome to think that Tahiri might have lived for most of her life with people who had killed her parents.

"Anakin, come meet my bantha," Tahiri called over her shoulder.

Anakin walked toward the three-meter-tall creature.

“His name is Bangor,” Tahiri began.

Sliven cut in abruptly with a string of grunts.

“Sliven says that we don’t name our banthas.” Tahiri turned to face the leader of her tribe.

“Well, I do,” she shot back in Basic.

Anakin looked confused.

“Oh, Sliven understands Basic, although I don’t know where he learned it. But he pretends he doesn’t, so I usually speak in his language,” Tahiri explained slowly, so that she could be certain Sliven understood her words. The Raider didn’t reply. Anakin studied the bantha beside Tahiri. He’d read that the Sand People used them as beasts of burden, and that they could survive for weeks in the desert without food or water. He reached up and petted the creature. Bangor turned its large brown eyes toward him, gently blinking long lashes.

“Bangor is an orphan, too,” Tahiri said. “He was found wandering alone in the desert shortly after I was found by Sliven.”

At that, the Raider growled fiercely.

“Sliven is angry,” Tahiri explained to Anakin. “He says that I’m not an orphan. He says I’m a Raider, and that we’ve wasted enough time and must return to the tribe before dark.” Tahiri frowned at Sliven, then whispered softly to Bangor. The bantha knelt, and she climbed aboard his back. Then she reached down to Anakin and pulled him up behind her. The bantha gently rose to his feet. Sliven pulled Tionne up behind him. Then he barked, and the banthas trotted away from the outskirts of Mos Eisley toward an expanse of desert which looked endless.

Anakin was suddenly overcome by the feeling that he and Tahiri were traveling into unspoken danger.

Chapter Five

They had been traveling for hours. Anakin felt the heat of Tatooine's twin suns beating down on his head. Tahiri had pulled the collar of her orange jumpsuit up to protect her face from blowing sand. The grit of the desert filled Anakin's mouth and eyes. There was no way to keep the sand out. Anakin wondered if this was what it was like for the young spirits trapped inside the globe. He hoped not.

An hour before, Sliven had offered the Jedi candidates some cloth to wrap their heads, and two pairs of eye protectors. Tahiri had declined for both of them, although she did accept shoes for herself. She was being difficult, but Anakin understood. His friend felt torn. Tahiri had thought it would be easy to make the decision to stay at the academy. But now that she was here, the decision would be more difficult.

No one spoke during the journey into the desert. Sliven led the group, but didn't utter a word.

"Is it always this quiet?" Anakin finally whispered to Tahiri.

"Yes," she replied. "Now you can understand why I talk so much. In all my years here, I don't think I said as much as I would in one day at the academy. And don't think I didn't try," Tahiri added with a laugh. "But the only one who would ever talk to me-really talk, once I learned his language-was Sliven."

“He’s not talking now,” Anakin noted.

“He will,” Tahiri said. “He will, because he’s the reason I’m here. Sliven is the leader of our tribe, but he’s more than that. He’s the one who found me. The Sand People are nomads, traveling in small tribes within the harsh desert. They’re experts at survival, because above all else they’re practical. The weak are left to die. Only the strong, those who can care for themselves, are part of the tribe. And outsiders, any outsiders, are of no concern. Especially children who don’t belong to the tribe.”

“But you were an outsider, an orphan child,” Anakin interrupted.

“Yes,” Tahiri said softly. “And for some reason Sliven chose to take me into his tribe. To care for me in the only way he knew how.. I didn’t grow up with a father or mother like you did, Anakin. But Sliven was as close to a father as I’ll ever know. He taught me how to scavenge for food and water, how to train and ride a bantha. And how to fight with a gaderffii stick. “Sliven knows that if I choose to remain at the academy the tribe will refuse to take me back. I think that having me return to make my decision was Sliven’s way of giving me one last chance to remain with the tribe, and with him.”

“It sounds like he truly cares for you,” Anakin offered.

“Cares?” Tahiri weighed the word thoughtfully. “In his own way, I know he does. But he’s never cared enough to give me the one thing in my life that I wanted. He has never told me the story of how he found me. And if he truly cared, he would give me my history,” Tahiri ended sadly.

“Are you sure he knows?” Anakin asked.

“I’ve sensed all my life that he knows more than he’s said,” Tahiri replied.

Sliven barked once, and the banthas halted at the top of a large sand dune. Anakin looked around them. There was nothing in sight-no structures, no other Raiders.

“Can you feel them?” Tahiri whispered to her friend.

“Who?” Anakin whispered back.

Nancy Richardson

“The tribe-they’re all here,” she replied. And, as if on cue, some twenty Raiders topped the sand dune to the left of the group. Silently they walked toward the Jedi candidates. Tahiri commanded Bangor down, and the bantha knelt so that she and Anakin could drop to the ground. Tahiri stood erect, her blonde hair blown back from her face by the licks of a hot evening breeze. The suns were beginning to set, casting a pale pink shadow along the dunes. Anakin watched his friend as she faced her tribe. There was confusion in her large green eyes, but there was also a resolve he hadn’t seen there before.

The Raiders who had traveled with them moved to join the rest of their tribe. All except Sliven. He stood one meter to the right of Tahiri. A female Raider’s voice rose from the group and spoke.

“Her name is Vexa,” Tahiri said, not trying to hide her dislike. “She says welcome home.”

The Raider stepped forward. She, too, was covered from head to toe; only her voice indicated that she was a woman.

“She says that they did not expect me to return. They did not expect me to fulfill the promise.”

“What promise?” Anakin asked under his breath. He sensed that Tahiri was uncertain, but his friend said nothing. The Raider continued in her strange, rough dialect. Tionne stepped forward. Seeing Anakin’s confusion, she began to translate.

“Sliven said you would come, that you would fulfill the promise he made many years ago. I myself am sorry to see you, for two reasons. First, I do not think you will survive, and the tribe will gain nothing by your death. Second, if you do survive, Sliven will remain the leader of our tribe.

“There are many of us who do not wish to follow Sliven. Years ago he showed his weakness. He brought an outsider into our tribe, one who was a child and could not add to our strength. If you survive, you will prove that Sliven was right, that you did grow into an adult member of our tribe. If that is the case, Sliven

will continue to lead us. If not, he will die, for that is the promise he made.”

Tionne paused.

“You knew this,” Tahiri said in a flat voice as she turned toward Sliven. “You made this promise and never told me about it. All my life you taught me how to survive in the desert, and I thought you taught me as your own, as one you cared for, maybe even loved. But you taught me so that one day I could fulfill a promise you made without my permission—a promise that might end my life or save your own.”

Sliven was silent.

“What did he promise?” Tahiri quietly asked Vexa.

As Vexa spoke, Tionne translated for Anakin.

“You will be taken deep into the Dune Sea, which borders the Jundland Wastes. It is the place you were found, a desolate place not often visited by Sand People. You will be left there without food or water, alone—or if you prefer, with the boy. I suggest you go alone—there is some chance that your skills may enable you to survive, but the boy is not from Tatooine, and he will be a burden to you. You will be left to find your way back to this tribe. To do so will mean using your strength and wits to find your way safely through the Dune Sea, across the mountains and the canyons of the Jundland Wastes, and then through the harsh, hot desert. “You have one week. During that time we will remain in this exact spot. If you do not return to the tribe in that time, we will know that you have either been captured by enemies or have not survived. Whatever, if you return to the tribe later than seven days from your departure, you will also have failed to fulfill the terms of the promise. But Tahiri—you do not have to do this.

“

Tahiri thought for a moment, then spoke.

“What happens if I don’t?” she asked.

Tionne gave Tahiri an incredulous look. How could the child even consider agreeing to such a thing? If Luke Skywalker had known that this was why Sliven had asked that she be returned,

Nancy Richardson

he would never have allowed Tahiri to go back to Tatooine, Tionne thought. And there was no way she would allow the child to fulfill Sliven's promise. Tahiri's safety was Tionne's responsibility.

"What happens?" Tahiri asked again. This time Sliven slowly answered in Basic.

"You will be returned to your ship," Sliven said. "And then shuttled back to the Jedi academy."

"And you'll be put to death," Tahiri said more to the tribe than to Sliven.

Sliven nodded.

"Why should I attempt to fulfill the promise?" Tahiri asked Sliven as she turned to face him. Her green eyes glowered from beneath ash blonde brows.

Sliven replied slowly. There was sadness in his voice.

"Years ago I did what I did to save your life. You may not believe that right now, but there was no other way for me to persuade the tribe to accept you."

"Even given that," Tahiri said quietly to Sliven, "why should I risk my life now so that you can live?"

"Because even if you do die," Sliven replied, "you will do so with the knowledge you've sought all your life: the history of your family, of who you really are."

Sliven moved forward, placed both hands on Tahiri's shoulders, and looked into her eyes with his own darkly goggled ones.

"That, too, was part of the deal, little one. You could only be told your history if you accepted the promise."

"Why?" Anakin interrupted. "That's cruel!"

"I agree, Anakin, the bargain was cruel," Sliven said. "But telling Tahiri her history was to be a reward of sorts from the tribe if she ever chose to fulfill the promise. And not telling Tahiri until that point was a punishment to me from the tribe. They knew she would ask, and that I would want to tell her the truth. They knew it would be difficult for me to keep Tahiri's

STAR WARS: Promises

history from her-that it would take the strength they had begun to believe I lacked.”

“Tell me my history,” Tahiri said with glowing eyes. “I accept the promise.”

“No!” Anakin cried out. But he couldn’t stop the words from leaving Tahiri’s mouth, any more than he could take them back once they had settled heavily on the sand.

Chapter Six

Anakin glowered at Tahiri. How could she agree to the deal Sliven had struck? How could she put her life in danger, and the lives of thousands inside the globe? Then he remembered what he'd told her on the shuttle only hours before. He'd said that no matter what happened on Tatooine, he would support her. Tahiri might beat the odds Vexa had spoken of and survive. If that happened, she'd finally know her history. And, perhaps that would give her the peace of mind she needed to forever leave the Raiders and return to the academy. Anakin stared off across the endless sea of sand.

"I'm going with you," he finally said to Tahiri.

"She might be right," Tahiri replied with a nod at Vexa. "I do know about survival in the desert - although I've never had to live without the tribe. You don't know anything. It's going to be hard enough for me without you tagging along."

"Stop, Tahiri," Anakin interrupted. "It doesn't matter what I know about the desert. I'm good with the Force and a great problem solver. We're a team, and that's the end of the discussion."

Tahiri nodded, then turned to Sliven.

"Wait," Tionne said in disbelief. "If you think I'm going to allow either of you to accept this deal, you're very wrong. Neither

of you. are going into the desert, and that's final," she said sternly.

"Tahiri's made her decision," Sliven interrupted. "Tionne, the tribe will not allow you to interfere. You will remain with us for one week. If the children don't return, we will take you back to the spot you've agreed to meet your shuttle pilot."

Tionne's silver eyes clouded with worry. There were too many Raiders to fight.

"Tahiri, please rethink your decision," she said with forced calm. "Tell me my history," Tahiri said to Sliven. Her voice was a command.

Sliven nodded, then led Anakin and Tahiri away from the tribe. Tionne watched the three walk away. There was absolutely nothing she could do to stop them. Vexa called out from behind them.

"She says we leave at dawn," Tahiri murmured.

Anakin turned toward the female Raider. Although he couldn't see her face, he was sure that she was smirking. And he could sense that she was pleased by Tahiri's choice. There was an old hatred inside of her that Anakin could almost taste. When they had moved from the tribe, Sliven gestured for Tahiri and Anakin to sit. They settled across from the Raider in the cooling sands of the desert.

Sliven pushed several tattered blankets toward the Jedi candidates. Now that the sun had set, a chilly breeze blew across the desert. Soon the frigid night that Tatooine was known for would wrap them in its cold hands. Anakin and Tahiri covered themselves with the blankets. Then, in a voice full of years, sand, and sorrow, the Raider began Tahiri's story.

"Your father's name was Tryst Veila, your mother's was Cassa. They were moisture farmers on Tatooine," Sliven began. "As you know, we have always lived in uneasy peace with the farmers on this planet. Your parents were no different. No different, except that for a small moment in time I knew them-and cared for them. "Almost six years ago to this day, there was a

Nancy Richardson

battle between my tribe and a group of smugglers who were hiding from their enemies in the desert. These smugglers tried to steal our food and water, and I was hurt in the battle. When the fight ended, I had been separated from my tribe and wounded to the point of near death. I had lost my bantha and was traveling by foot in the desert when I saw your parents' farm. I had lost blood, and hadn't had water in several days. I crawled to their doorway. Your mother, Cassa, found me passed out several meters from her front door. She dragged me inside her home, peeled away my robes, and treated my wounds.

"It took almost two months for me to heal. Several times in the first weeks I almost died, and I would have if not for Cassa and Tryst. They showed me kindness I never knew existed. "Tahiri, you were not quite three years old when your parents cared for me. I remember your mother running her fingers through your blonde hair, the same color as hers. And I can see your father, his laughing green eyes the shape of your own. And you-you were fascinated by my eye protectors and the cloth of my robes. You would crawl onto my sleeping pad and giggle as you traced my goggles or wound my tattered robe around your fingers. And it was from both you and your parents that I learned to understand and speak Basic. That is what later helped me to teach you the language of the Raiders.

"It took two months for me to heal. During that time Tryst and Cassa cared for me. They fed me and tended my wounds, and allowed me to play with their daughter-a being full of light and happiness. When I was strong enough, I helped your mother with light chores. One day, I even fashioned Tryst his own gaderffii and taught him how to fight with it. He learned quickly-it was strange how he fought, sensing my movements almost before I made them, just as Cassa could feel my emotions without hearing me speak."

"They were both sensitive to the Force," Anakin said quietly. Sliven nodded.

“Since that time with Tryst and Cassa, I have often thought the same thing,” he said. “For I saw the identical abilities in Tahiri that I noticed in her parents. That is why I wasn’t surprised when the Jedi Master, Luke Skywalker, and the Jedi Knight, Tionne, asked to take Tahiri to their academy. I knew that the Force was in her blood-and I let her go with the Jedi because I couldn’t deny her that tie with her parents.”

Sliven turned back to Tahiri and paused before he began again. Anakin could sense that the Raider was in pain. Tahiri leaned forward, caught by his words.

“As I said, I taught your father how to fight with the gaderffii. Soon he could beat me without even trying. And it wasn’t because I was still wounded-in those months with your parents I had regained most of my strength. My hesitation to leave is one of the reasons that Cassa and Tryst were killed. You see, I didn’t know that my tribe was still searching for me. But one of the wounded had seen me trudge away from the battle. And it is my people’s way to search for a wounded leader before they name another.

“The morning my tribe found me, Tryst and I were sparring with our gaderffii. He was winning, of course-I can still hear your mother’s laughter as she watched us. It was a moment of happiness, being there with them. And then the air was filled with battle cries. Moments later your parents were dead. My tribe had thought that I was being attacked, and they had struck to save my life.

“I remember standing there and hearing your shrill cry from inside the farmhouse. It was almost as if you knew, as if you felt. your parents’ death. I raced inside and picked you up. Vexa followed me. ‘Leave her to die,’ she instructed. ‘You are back with your tribe now.’ And that is why I made the bargain. I didn’t make it, out of selfishness. It was the only way I knew to save you. And the years I spent training you to live with the tribe were not spent so that you could one day keep the promise and save my life. I taught you as a father....” Sliven’s voice finally broke.

Nancy Richardson

“Finish,” Anakin said softly to Sliven.

The Raider began to speak again.

“I made the bargain with my tribe that afternoon as we sat outside your farmhouse. We argued fiercely. ‘Leave her,’ they said. ‘She is not one of us.’ Vexa was driven half crazy by my idea of bringing you into the tribe. She said that I was weak, not fit to be a leader. But I couldn’t leave you, not after your parents’ kindness and my fondness for you. So I agreed to the terms of a promise Vexa thought up. You would live with us, during which time I would be responsible for you. When you were nine years old, the age when Raider children are considered full working members of the tribe, you would have to leave us or fulfill the promise to show you belonged.

“If you refused, we planned to take you to Mos Eisley and leave you in the city. There, you’d have to find work, a family, or a friend to care for you. The chances of that would have been slim. I was secretly relieved when you were invited to the Jedi academy. That meant that you would have another choice if you decided that the deal I struck was too difficult to accept. If you chose to honor the promise, I would be allowed to tell you your history. If you did not survive, or refused the bargain, I would give up my life.

“Before we left the farmhouse, I made a thick paste and pressed Cassa’s and Tryst’s thumbs into it to make a print. When the paste set, I carved it into a pendant and placed it on a strip of leather. It was the only way I could give you something of your parents.

“I knew that this moment would come. That you would learn that I was the cause of your parents ‘ death, and that I made a promise to save your life, which bought you six more years, but years of not knowing your own history. Still, I don’t think I could ever have prepared myself for the hatred you must feel for me. Perhaps I am as weak as Vexa believes me to be, after all.”

Tahiri studied the Raider who had been a father to her, the only father she remembered. She thought of her parents, whom

she'd just learned had been very much in love, and who had died because of a misunderstanding. Her fingers caressed the thumbprints of her pendant, and then she spoke.

"I don't hate you, Sliven," Tahiri began. "You didn't strike my parents down. And those who did thought they were protecting you. My parents cared for you because they chose to, just as you chose to care for me. And I know now that you cared," Tahiri added. "One other thing: Caring doesn't make you weak-it's what made my parents ' love strong, and what makes my friendship with Anakin strong." Tahiri paused to understand the jumble of her thoughts before she continued. "What I choose to do now isn't on your shoulders, Sliven," Tahiri stated. "You bought me my life, and now what I do with that life is my decision. I've accepted, not because I had to, but because I know it's the right thing for me to do. I owe you thanks for my life, and for being the man I know as my father. And if I survive, I want your thumbprint in a pendant next to those of my parents."

Anakin met his friend's gaze. He was surprised by her ability to understand Sliven's motives. There was no anger in her voice, only acceptance and peace. Sliven rose and nodded at Tahiri before he left the two Jedi candidates alone. It was clear that Tahiri had deeply moved him. Anakin reached over and touched Tahiri's shoulder as he watched crystal tears run slowly down her face. They were sad tears, but at the same time they were good. Tahiri now knew who she was, and in the knowing she was free to become a Jedi Knight, if she chose.

Chapter Seven

Massive hands gripped the front of Anakin's Jedi academy jumpsuit and hauled him to his feet. He shook his grogginess off like a bad dream and prepared to fight. Tahiri, too, was ripped to a standing position. Anakin's ice blue eyes swept over the situation. They were surrounded by Raiders, who growled and snarled madly.

"Tahiri," he said roughly, "are you all right?"

"Fine," Tahiri replied in a voice still coated with sleep. Together they were pushed toward Sliven, who sat alone in the sands.

What is going on? Anakin thought, trying to control the confusion he felt at their treatment.

"It must be time," Tahiri replied.

Anakin saw that pale pink scribbles of dawn had bathed the golden sands in soft rose. Some wake-up call, he thought grumpily. Sliven nodded once at Anakin and Tahiri, then allowed five Raiders to take them to their waiting banthas. The large animals stood silently, their long, shaggy brown coats curling down to the sand. The Jedi candidates were barely settled aboard Bangor when a loud grunt signaled the banthas to ride. Anakin noted that Tahiri didn't look back at Sliven as they started across the dunes with a dull kick of sand. He didn't see Tionne watching

as they raced off, a small humanoid Jedi Knight surrounded by a crowd of Raiders. If Anakin had seen Tionne, he would have been alarmed at the look of worry and fear written across her features. A day passed, then another. The only sounds in the desert were the crunch of bantha hooves. The terrain stretched out endlessly as Bangor followed the five Raiders deeper into the desert. The group stopped twice each day—once during the sweltering heat of midday to sip water and eat brown lumps of food, which tasted vile and which Anakin didn't want identified, and at night, when the suns set and the desert became so cold that his fingers grew numb.

Then Anakin huddled with Tahiri beneath the thin blanket the Raiders provided. That afternoon, the group had climbed quickly through low, sand-colored mountains. Anakin had sensed fear in the fierce Raiders. He'd been too hot and tired to ask Tahiri 'what they could possibly be afraid of. Now, as they lay against Bangor for warmth beneath the dark covers of the night sky, Anakin was once again too exhausted to talk. He watched Tahiri scratch her bantha's scruffy neck. The creature stared at Tahiri with soft brown eyes, and Anakin could sense the bond between them. He fell off into a dreamless sleep. Thoughts of how he and Tahiri were going to survive in the desert without food and water slid unanswered to the sand. They would wait in this spot until tomorrow. There was no water in the Dune Sea. Not that Anakin had expected any as they traveled through the sea—a vast desert expanse that stretched thousands of kilometers. It was hard to believe that an area could be more barren than the desert and the Jundland Wastes.

But the Dune Sea was, Anakin thought bleakly as he scanned the never-ending sand. Midway through the third day, the Raiders began to travel more slowly, cautiously. What could be dangerous out here? Anakin wondered. His thoughts were cut short when one of the Raiders barked and all the banthas halted. Must be time for lunch, he thought without relish. Anakin slid off Bangor and gave Tahiri a hand down. The heat of the day

Nancy Richardson

hadn't lessened with the onset of afternoon. Tahiri's hair was matted down with sweat, and her lips had begun to crack from the beating rays of the suns. As the two children sank to the ground, one of the Raiders grabbed Bangor's lead rope and drew the bantha toward him. Then, in a flash, the Raiders remounted their banthas and tore away from Anakin and Tahiri, bathing them in a prickling shower of sand. Neither moved as they watched the Raiders race into the distance. They saw Bangor struggle to pull away from the line, to return to Tahiri, but he was held firmly to the group. The Raiders topped a dune and disappeared from view.

Anakin scanned the Dune Sea through squinting eyes. He and Tahiri sat in the center of an unending desert. Above them the twin suns of Tatooine beat down relentlessly. There were no life-forms in sight. Just sun and sand. Sand and sun.

"Any suggestions?" Anakin asked Tahiri.

"By night, the tracks left by the banthas will be covered by blowing sand," Tahiri began. "Let's follow them until they disappear. At least that'll head us in the right direction."

"It's a start," Anakin said feebly. "What about food and water?"

Tahiri replied, "That will depend on what we come across."

There was a hard glint in her green eyes. Anakin couldn't help remembering something he'd read about the Sand People. Survival was the rule. Survival at all costs. He began to trudge beside Tahiri. They rose and fell over the dunes, their eyes never leaving the bantha prints, which were already beginning to fade beneath the blowing sands. Hours passed, and the twin suns of Tatooine began to set. And then, without warning, the trail disappeared and Anakin and Tahiri were left alone, truly alone.

Or were they? Anakin wondered as a sense of danger raced down his spine like lightning. Were they alone?

Chapter Eight

The sand beneath Anakin's feet began to shift. Before he had the chance to run, the desert floor rumbled and shook. Tahiri lost her balance and fell beside him, then began to roll downward, toward a pit of sand several meters away that neither Jedi candidate had noticed in the fading light.

"What's happening?" Anakin yelled.

Tahiri's hands clawed at the sand as she continued to slide away from her friend. Her small fingers ran through the grains like water. Then her legs dropped over the edge of the pit, and in a flash she disappeared from view. Anakin threw himself forward, staring into the pit. Tahiri's fall had been broken by a small dirt ledge, a meter from the edge. Anakin reached for her, his fingers just managing to grasp her hand. He tried to pull her back up the sandy hill, but it was all he could do to hold her in place. Tahiri's frightened green eyes locked on. Anakin's. He pulled harder, and slowly he began to draw her out of the pit. Tahiri dug her knees into the dirt walls and scrambled up the sliding terrain.

Suddenly, Tahiri's feet shot out from beneath her. She struggled as she lost her footing, then gave a small cry as she slid back down to the ledge.

"Give me your hand!" Anakin called to his friend.

Nancy Richardson

Tahiri reached up again. But something made her turn the instant before their fingers met. When she did, fear rolled over her in a tidal wave and she dropped to her knees and out of Anakin's reach. A thick, puce-colored tentacle emerged from the depths of the pit and snaked through the air. Tahiri froze in terror.

The tentacle whipped through the pit, searching for the prey it had sensed. Three more tentacles snaked upward and joined the first.

"Tahiri, grab my hand!" Anakin cried. Still his friend didn't move. I can't reach her, Anakin thought with growing frustration and terror. Anakin crawled forward on his stomach, dug his toes into the sand, and leaned into the pit.

He reached down and grabbed at Tahiri's jumpsuit. The creature in the pit sensed his movement, and tentacles lashed toward the Jedi candidates. Anakin stopped breathing, his fingers frozen on Tahiri's suit. The tentacles brushed along the walls of the pit, searching, searching. I've got to get her out of here, Anakin thought. He could barely control his panic as he watched the tentacles draw nearer. Tahiri slowly turned to her friend.

"What is it?" Anakin mouthed to Tahiri. Tahiri shook her head. She had no idea what the creature was, only that it wanted to wrap them in its tentacles and draw them downward. It doesn't matter what it is, Anakin thought. He could sense the creature's hunger.

"Climb," Anakin mouthed to Tahiri.

She didn't move. She was frozen in panic, her green eyes were fixed on the tentacles as they danced through the air. Anakin tightened his grip on Tahiri's arms until she turned to face him again.

"Climb," he said again. This time his ice blue eyes flashed, and his word was a command that rang with the power of the Force. Immediately, Tahiri turned and began to scramble up the dirt and sand wall behind her. Anakin drew her up, helping her keep her balance when she slid. He could sense the creature's tentacles

moving toward them. The moment Tahiri's hands reached the edge of the pit, Anakin leaned back and yanked her out.

Then they ran. Anakin and Tahiri ran until the creature and the pit were four dunes behind them and their lungs ached. And when they fell to the sand, gasping for breath and sweating in the stillness of the desert night, they didn't notice the cold. All they saw was the beauty of the stars, and all they felt was the relief of their own freedom. And when sleep swept over them like the blowing of the desert sand, they gave themselves up to its hands.

Chapter Nine

Anakin awoke, facedown, in the warm desert sands of Tatooine. He felt his belly rumbling in hunger, and his throat burned with thirst. Sand clung to his eyelashes and crusted along his mouth. He reached up to wipe the grains from his face. His senses came alive. He smelled their company before he saw them.

“Anakin, we’ve got a slight problem,” Tahiri said softly as she rolled to face her friend. She motioned with her head toward the brown-robed creatures that stood in a circle around them.

“What are they?” Anakin asked as he wrinkled his nose. Whatever the beings were, they smelled rotten, he thought.

“Jawas,” Tahiri whispered. Anakin remembered hearing about the scavenger race from his uncle Luke. Jawas were rodent - like beings that traveled in bands, searching for wrecked ships to salvage, vehicles to steal, and discarded hardware to collect. Anakin studied the meter-tall creatures. There were ten of them, and they jabbered and pointed at him and Tahiri, their yellow eyes glowing.

“I think they’re trying to figure out if we’re worth something or if they should just leave us in the desert,” Anakin said. If the Jawas left them, he thought, he and Tahiri would die of thirst,

hunger, and exposure. The Jawas moved toward the two Jedi. Tahiri rose to her feet.

“Careful,” Anakin whispered.

“They aren’t really dangerous,” Tahiri said softly.

“In fact, they usually like humans, because we’re the ones they sell their scavenged material to.”

“I’d be willing to bet that we don’t exactly look like paying customers,” Anakin grumbled as he stood up. The Jawas quickly decided that Anakin and Tahiri weren’t worth bothering with and began to walk away.

“Strange that they’re walking,” Tahiri murmured.

“They usually travel in sandcrawlers.”

“What are sandcrawlers?” Anakin asked with interest.

“They’re huge ore haulers that human miners brought to Tatooine years ago. They expected to make a fortune in the Wastelands. But they discovered that there’s not much worth mining out here. So, they left the haulers and the Jawas took them. Jawas use the sandcrawlers to find and collect metals and wrecked machinery. The deserts here are full of junk. Galactic battles have been fought near Tatooine for hundreds of years. And whatever falls from space and lands here is preserved by the dry climate. Jawas find wrecked ships, droids, and other machinery, which they fix and sell in Mos Eisley or to moisture farmers in the desert.”

Tahiri watched silently as the Jawas walked away from them.

“Anakin, let’s follow them,” she suggested with a glint in her eye. “Wherever they’re camped, there’s got to be food and water.”

Anakin and Tahiri began to tag along with the Jawas. If they noticed, they didn’t turn around.

“At least we’re heading toward the Jundland Wastes,” Anakin noted with a nod toward the mountain peaks that had appeared as they crested a dune.

“So why do they smell so bad?” Anakin asked Tahiri as they trudged through the sand.

Nancy Richardson

“Sliven once told me that the Jawas love their smell,” Tahiri began. “They use scent to identify each other, to sense health, anger, or sadness. To us, they stink. But to them, scent is information.”

“I wonder what information they got about us,” Anakin said. He didn’t need Tahiri to answer. Fear, hunger, thirst, confusion; that about summed up their smells. Over an hour later, the Jawas stopped walking.

“Must be home sweet home,” Anakin said as he spied what had to be a sandcrawler. The machine was a dull brown, its hull ravaged by wind storms and the suns’ rays.

“If they’ve got that thing, why walk for hours in the sand?” Anakin asked Tahiri.

“It must not be working,” Tahiri said as she squinted at the sandcrawler.

“Sandcrawlers are pretty old. And even though Jawas are good mechanics, sometimes a machine just stops working and can’t be fixed.”

“I bet I could fix it,” Anakin said softly as he walked toward the vehicle. The Jawas let out alarmed cries and raced to block Anakin’s path to the sandcrawler.

“That is,” Anakin added, “if they’d let me near it.”

“Hey, guys,” Anakin said with a smile. “I’m not going to hurt your sandcrawler, I just want to try to fix it for you.”

He watched as one of the Jawas lifted a canteen to his lips and drank deeply before passing the water to another.

“How about if I fix it, and you guys give my friend and me some of that water?” Anakin wheedled. The Jawas didn’t reply. In fact, they ignored him. Anakin thought about the time Tahiri had been drowning in the river on Yavin 4 and he’d used his voice and the Force to command her to struggle, to swim. Could he do the same thing with the Jawas?

Tahiri saw the glint in Anakin’s ice blue eyes.

“What is it?” she asked. “I was just thinking that maybe I could use the Force to command the Jawas to let me into their

sandcrawler. If I can fix it, maybe they'll give us a ride to the Jundland Wastes, and some food and water... It's a dumb idea, right?" Anakin said in embarrassment.

Tahiri replied slowly.

"You've done it before, and I think it's our best chance. You've got to try."

Tahiri gave a sharp whistle and the Jawas turned to face the Jedi students.

"Here goes nothing," Anakin murmured as he faced the Jawas. "Let me into the sandcrawler," he said in a soft voice. The Jawas jabbered, but still blocked Anakin's path. It was clear that the sandcrawler, working or not, was their most valued possession.

"Let me pass," Anakin said more strongly. One of the Jawas moved aside, but the others let out a string of sounds and the creature stopped in his tracks. It's not working, Anakin said to himself in frustration. His throat burned from speaking, and his head felt light with hunger. I've got to calm myself, got to believe that I can succeed, he thought. Anakin closed his eyes, and the next time he spoke his voice carried the power of the Force.

"LET ME PASS, NOW!" he called. The Jawas moved aside. Anakin walked toward the vehicle, his ice blue eyes glinting in the midday sun. He climbed inside and disappeared from view. Tahiri trotted after her friend and followed him inside the sandcrawler. It reeked. Anakin tried not to gag at the stink inside the vehicle. He sensed that Tahiri, too, was trying not to let the smell overcome her. Anakin had never been inside a sandcrawler, but he'd also never seen anything mechanical that he couldn't figure out. When he was only two, he'd amazed his brother and sister, the twins Jaina and Jacen, by taking apart a droid. and putting it back together. He quickly found the control panel deep within the vehicle and began to tinker.

"Can you fix it?" Tahiri asked her friend. Anakin ran his hands along the tangle of cables and wires that trailed from the control panel.

Nancy Richardson

"I think I've found the problem," he began excitedly. "There's a short circuit in a connector." Anakin studied one of the cables.

Its surface was slightly darker than the rest.

"It's this one," he murmured. "Tahiri, can you find me another cable in that junk?" Anakin asked with a wave of his hand toward the pile of broken-down droids and machinery the Jawas had collected. Tahiri began to rummage through the metal scraps.

"Will this work?" she asked as she held up a meter-long cable.

"No," Anakin replied. "Its got to be longer."

Several minutes later Tahiri held up two more cables. Anakin selected one and replaced the burned out cable.

"Let's see if this will do the trick," Anakin said softly. He connected the cable to the control panel, then leaned over to push the sandcrawler's start-up button. With a deep, rasping rumble the sandcrawler hummed to life. Anakin and Tahiri emerged, to the cheers of the Jawas. The Jedi candidates were handed water jugs and brown lumps of food. They drank deeply, the liquid soothing their throats and splashing into empty bellies. When they'd eaten their fill, Tahiri turned to the Jawas and thanked them. Then she pointed at the Jundland Wastes, at herself and Anakin, and at the sandcrawler. The Jawas understood, and beckoned Anakin and Tahiri toward the sandcrawler.

Soon the Jawas and the Jedi candidates were headed for the craggy mountains in the distance. And the smell that had tightened their stomachs no longer made Anakin and Tahiri feel sick. Now it was the smell of new friends. Anakin stared out the window plate of the sandcrawler. The Jundland Wastes loomed before him, its jagged rocks and canyons signaling that too soon the ride would be over and they would once again be traveling by foot.

Beyond those canyons, Anakin thought, is Tahiri's tribe. And we have five more days to find them. His thoughts wandered as

STAR WARS: Promises

the twin suns of Tatooine set over the desert, transforming its glittering golden sands into darkness.

Chapter Ten

The sandcrawler reached the scattered rocks that signaled the beginning of the Jundland Wastes on their third morning in the desert. The Jawas drove the battered sandcrawler until they could no longer navigate the rocks, then ground to a halt.

“Thank you,” Anakin said to the Jawas as he and Tahiri prepared to leave the sandcrawler. One of the Jawas grabbed his arm.

“What is it, little guy?” Anakin asked. “Don’t you want us to leave?” Anakin sensed that the Jawa wanted to tell him something. Maybe he smelled Anakin’s and Tahiri’s confusion and fear. Maybe he smelled danger in the distance.

Unfortunately, Anakin couldn’t understand the Jawa’s speech. And neither could Tahiri. Finally, the Jawa filled two rough cloth packs with food and water and handed them to the Jedi candidates. Once again, Anakin and Tahiri thanked their new friends. Then they climbed out of the sandcrawler and into the beginning of the Jundland Wastes. One of the Jawa. s called out after them, and they caught two gaderffii sticks that were tossed through the air. The Jawas must have recognized the smell of bantha and Raiders on Anakin’s and Tahiri’s clothes and skin.

Tahiri and Anakin hoisted the makeshift packs onto their backs. They used the gaderffii sticks to help them walk along the

rocks. And, although he didn't ask, Anakin sensed that these were weapons they might need.

"Tahiri, I need to stop for a minute," Anakin gasped several hours later. The travel was strenuous, and it was taking its toll. Tahiri was used to the heat, the sun, the dry climate. For Anakin, who'd lived his whole life in the city of Coruscant,

Tatooine was a harsh planet. Tahiri handed Anakin a jug of water, and he drank sparingly. Both Jedi candidates ate some of the brownish lumps of food. Then they began traveling again, bathed in the glare of the sun. A high-pitched scream filled the air.

"Tahiri," Anakin whispered behind his friend, amazed that she hadn't stopped at the horrific cry. "What was that?"

"That was the scream of a womp rat," Tahiri said quietly. "But it wasn't about to attack us. That was the cry of a wounded rat. I know the sound-I've fought a lot of rodents over the years."

Anakin and Tahiri wound their way along the canyons of the Jundland Wastes, the desert beyond now in sight and within their grasp. But Anakin sensed a growing fear in Tahiri. And he again had the disturbing feeling that they were not alone. Several high-pitched screams filled the air, so bloodcurdling and drawn-out that Anakin and Tahiri both dropped to the ground behind a large rock.

"More womp rats," Tahiri whispered.

This time the screams had shaken her. Anakin started to rise. He'd fight the rodents with his gaderffii stick if they were going to attack.

"Those were death cries," Tahiri said, sensing Anakin's intentions. "Something killed them."

"Another rat?" Anakin asked hopefully.

"I don't think so," Tahiri replied. "They rarely attack each other."

Nancy Richardson

“Let’s get out of here,” Anakin said, grabbing Tahiri’s arm and pulling her up. “Whatever’s out there, we don’t want to wait for it to find us.”

“It’s a krayt dragon,” Tahiri said, her voice dripping with dread. “I’ve sensed something following us for the last hour.”

Krayt dragons were large carnivorous reptiles that lived in the mountains surrounding Tatooine’s Jundland Wastes. Some thought that the dragons no longer existed, that they’d become extinct when settlers came to Tatooine, exposing them to various infections as well as hunting them for food and trophies.

“I thought krayt dragons were! pretty rare,” Anakin said to Tahiri.

“Tell that to the one stalking us right now,” Tahiri replied with fear.

Chapter Eleven

All thoughts were wiped out of Anakin's mind as a rock-crushing roar filled the air. And this time, it was not the sound of a womp rat. This time it was full of the venom of a different creature. A creature that towered over the Jedi candidates, its massive jaws spread open to reveal a red forked tongue and rows of black teeth that glistened with the greenish ooze of womp rat blood.

"Krayt dragon," Anakin said grimly. The beast was perched on the rocks above them, its head covered with seven black horns, its back ridged with sharp bony nodules and a jagged dorsal spine. The creature's scaly green body was tipped with claws of crimson that matched its reddish eyes—angry eyes, divided by black slit-shaped pupils that stared intently from Anakin to Tahiri and back again.

Anakin slowly stood.

"Leave us alone," he commanded in a voice touched with fear and only weakly ringing with the Force. The krayt dragon hissed, but made no move to leave the Jedi candidates.

"LEAVE US!" Anakin called out. The dragon screeched, then struck out like lightning, one massive limb batting Anakin into the air. He landed on the rocks, ten meters from where he'd stood. The dragon's claws had ripped through his academy

Nancy Richardson

jumpsuit and made five bloody gashes across his rib cage. The sliced skin burned, but Anakin sensed that his wounds weren't deep.

"I'm all right, Tahiri," he called. That's when he heard her scream. Anakin bolted to his feet in time to see the monster moving in on Tahiri.

"Stop!" he cried. But the reptile kept advancing toward his friend. "Fight him, Tahiri!" Anakin yelled.

Tahiri rose and tried to strike the dragon with her gaderffii. The creature's crimson eyes flashed as it batted the weapon from Tahiri's grip. Then Tahiri was covered by the dragon's dark shadow. Anakin scrambled across the rocks. He had to save his friend. The dragon turned as he approached. Tahiri was pinned beneath its front legs. The monster's red tongue flicked toward Anakin, as if tasting him.

"Let her go!" Anakin growled at the loathsome creature. The dragon charged Anakin, its eyes flashing. Anakin's ice blue eyes narrowed as he stared at the advancing monster. There has got to be a way to defeat it, he thought.

But a split second later the creature grasped him in its jaw and turned to romp rapidly through the canyon. Tahiri bolted to her feet. To save Anakin, she had to trail the krayt dragon. She ripped her pack off her back and tore after the beast. It would take all her strength to keep up with the creature, but if she lost sight of it, she wouldn't be able to help her friend. So, you've decided Anakin is enough for dinner, Tahiri thought grimly as she climbed after the creature. She could feel Anakin's fear as he was carried away. Tahiri raced through the rocks. She only hoped the dragon's lair wasn't far away; the pace was quickly wearing her down.

I won't let you down, Anakin, Tahiri thought. There are all kinds of strength-that's what Master Ikrit once told me. And I'm going to find the one that will defeat the dragon. If the creature sensed her as she followed, it didn't let on. In fact, it seemed to have completely forgotten Tahiri existed. She wondered if the

krait lost its desire to hunt and kill once it found its prey. Tahiri followed the dragon for fifteen minutes as it wound along the rocky canyon.

Her breath escaped in ragged streams. She was exhausted, but she wouldn't stop to rest until she had saved Anakin. The monster was widening the distance between them, and Tahiri forced herself to quicken her pace. She hoped that wherever it was heading, there wouldn't be any more dragons. Fighting one was going to be hard enough. Suddenly, the dragon disappeared.

Tahiri's heart sank. Had she fallen so far behind that she'd lost the creature? She stared in every direction - there was no sign of the dragon or Anakin. Her shoulders sagged in defeat and she slowly sat down on a large boulder. Her eyes filled with tears and she angrily shook her head to get rid of the unwanted saltwater. Out of the corner of one eye, Tahiri noticed a dark hole between two large rocks. She leapt forward. From out of the hole rose an oily smell that burned her eyes and made her gag.

She crouched and peered down. She couldn't see anything in the blackness. Tahiri grabbed the rough edges of the hole and dropped in, her body sliding several meters before coming to a stop at the mouth of a rocky tunnel that stretched deep within the mountain. Must be home, she thought wryly. Then she began to creep along the tunnel. Several times she had to step over the remains of what she could only assume were Raiders, judging by the white tattered robes that covered the skeletons.

The carcasses of womp rats also lined the tunnel. Tahiri tried to ignore them as she snuck along. Anakin was crouched in the center of a basically round room, the only light there filtered through small holes in the ceiling that were exposed to the surface of the mountain. As Tahiri's eyes adjusted, she saw that the lair was also littered with the skeletons of womp rats and some brown-robed remains.

The dragon was rustling on the far side of the room. Now that he had Anakin, he didn't seem to be in too much of a rush to eat him. Must be saving him for later, Tahiri thought with

Nancy Richardson

deadly calm. All the fear that had initially coursed through her veins had drained away. In its place, she felt the strength of the Force surging through her. There was no way she was going to allow the krayt dragon to hurt her friend. Anakin sensed Tahiri's presence. He raised his face and peered into the darkness.

Slowly he rose to knees, then gained his feet. Tahiri stepped out of the shadows and moved to Anakin's side. The side of his academy jumpsuit was drenched in blood, and Tahiri stifled a cry. Anakin grasped her hand tightly, and for a brief moment their eyes met. The look they exchanged was one of calm and resolve. They would fight this beast together.

The krayt dragon turned and rose on its hind feet. A thin screech rolled out. Its dinner was being threatened, and that made the reptile angry. Very angry. Slowly the dragon advanced on the Jedi candidates. And in a flash it had snatched Anakin and pinned him beneath its clawed feet.

"My voice didn't work," Anakin groaned to Tahiri.

"So we've got to try something else." He stared into the razor teeth that lined the creature's jaws. "And soon, because its breath will kill me if its teeth don't first."

Tahiri stared desperately around the lair for a weapon. Her eyes stopped on a large boulder that jutted out on the far side of the room. Maybe I can distract him, she thought, and then we can try to run. Tahiri closed her eyes and focused on using the Force to pry the boulder loose.

Nothing happened.

"Any ideas?" Anakin gasped as the dragon stared down at him with hungry eyes.

"Believe and you succeed," Tahiri murmured to herself as she continued concentrating on the rock. Moments later there was a thunderous crash.

Chapter Twelve

The rancid breath of the reptile rolled over Anakin in hot waves. It opened its jaws wide, preparing to crush and consume him. Tahiri stood in the center of the dragon's lair, her eyes closed. There was a thunderous crash behind the dragon, and clouds of dust and sand filled the room. The reptile whirled and raced toward the noise. It must think something is attacking from behind, Tahiri thought as she opened her eyes and watched. Anakin leapt to his feet and raced to Tahiri's side.

"Run!" he cried as he tore toward the tunnel.

"No," Tahiri called after her friend. "The dragon is too fast-it'll just catch us and bring us back. We've got to stand and fight it."

"But it's too strong," Anakin exclaimed.

"We can't."

The dust cleared, and Tahiri watched the dragon slither away from the boulder she'd dropped. The reptile turned back. to its prisoners, crimson eyes flashing that it would not let them get away. She noticed several large rocks lining the ceiling of the cave, only a few meters in front of where the dragon now stood.

"We have to trap it beneath those rocks," Tahiri murmured. "Anakin, we've got to try to drop those boulders on it," Tahiri said as she pointed to the outcropping of rocks. Anakin nodded,

Nancy Richardson

and the Jedi candidates began to focus. There wasn't much time. Tahiri sensed that the dragon was about to dart forward.

She repeated part of the Jedi Code to herself: *There is no try, only do*. And, as the words faded away, so did her fear and frustration. Tahiri heard the boulders begin to move, a grating sound combined with dropping dust and pebbles. She opened her eyes and watched as the krayt dragon began to move forward.

"Now, Anakin!" Tahiri cried. "Drop them now!"

In a split second, five large boulders hurtled down through the air and landed with dull thuds on the krayt dragon's tail. The reptile roared with frustration as it tried to reach the Jedi candidates. Its tail was firmly pinned beneath the boulders.

"Now let's get out of here before the dragon gets those boulders off" Anakin said,.

On their way out, Tahiri grabbed several abandoned canteens of water. Whoever had brought them into the dragon's lair no longer needed them, and she and Anakin would need all the water they could find to cross the mesa region of the Wastes and the desert beyond, Tahiri thought. It took the night of their fourth day and all of the fifth to cross the mesa. They slept for two hours each during the hottest part of the day, one keeping watch, then the other.

Once, Tahiri spied a tribe of Raiders in the distance, but the group didn't seem to notice them. By the evening of day five, Anakin and Tahiri reached the desert. They were almost out of water, now only taking small sips from the one battered green canteen they had left. Tahiri's lips were cracked from the dryness, and her pale skin was red and burned from the harsh suns. Anakin's gashes from the krayt dragon had stopped bleeding, but they had begun to fester, and infection had set in. He winced as he bent to put the water jug back in the pack.

"Does it hurt very badly?" Tahiri asked as she gently touched the side of his tattered jumpsuit. Anakin smiled at his friend.

“Not too bad,” he replied. “It’s not important. What matters is figuring out how we’re going to find your tribe. We’ve crossed the Dune Sea and the Wastes, but we don’t have enough water to survive much longer. And we only have two days left to fulfill the promise.” Tahiri stared at her friend. He looked terrible.

His skin was deep pink. His eyes were ringed with purple circles. The gashes on his side were infected. He needed medical attention and food. Something sparkled in the distance and caught Tahiri’s eye.

“Wait here,” Tahiri called to her friend as she trotted off.

“Where are you going?” Anakin asked.

But if Tahiri heard him, she didn’t reply. Ten minutes later Tahiri stood before the sparkling object she’d spied in the distance. It was a hubba gourd, a tough-skinned melon covered with tiny reflective crystals. She picked it up and returned to her friend.

“What is it?” Anakin asked when Tahiri tossed him the oblong melon.

“It’s a kind of fruit,” Tahiri explained. “Hard to digest, but it’s food.” Tahiri pulled her multitool out of her pocket and began to carve up the melon. She and Anakin ate slowly. When they were done, Tahiri took the hubba rinds and placed them over the gashes on Anakin’s ribs.

“Raider medicine?” Anakin asked with a wry smile.

“Sliven taught me that the rind of the hubba gourd helps stop infections,” Tahiri said. “Your cuts are already infected, but this might slow it down.” Tahiri tore some material off the sleeves of Anakin’s jumpsuit and bound the rinds to his rib cage. Then she sat down to consider their options.

What we need is a bantha, Tahiri thought. That wasn’t exactly right. What they needed was her bantha, Bangor. Bangor would be able to lead them back to the tribe.

“Which way?” Anakin asked, interrupting Tahiri’s thoughts. Tahiri scanned the horizon. Sand dunes everywhere and no sign

Nancy Richardson

of her tribe. They could be just over the next dune or a hundred kilometers from where they now stood.

“I’ve always felt a deep bond with Bangor,” Tahiri said.

Anakin stared at his friend, wondering why she was talking about her bantha. Tahiri continued,

“I believe that banthas are more complicated than my people know. Bangor has always been able to sense my fears.”

“A lot of creatures have the ability to sense fear,” Anakin interrupted.

“It’s not just that,” Tahiri replied. “There were times in my life when I needed Bangor—if I was sad or lonely, he always came to me. It was as if he heard me calling him for comfort.”

“Are you saying what I think you’re saying?” Anakin asked.

“Yes,” Tahiri said, meeting his eyes. “I’m going to try to call Bangor to us. We’re almost out of food and water, and we’re definitely out of strength,” she added gravely. “If we don’t get to the tribe soon, we’ll die out here.”

Chapter Thirteen

Anakin stared at the horizon. The suns were beginning to drop, and soon night would come. Their sixth night. They had only one more day to find the tribe. If they failed, for whatever reason, Sliven would be put to death.

“Tahiri, it’s not working,” Anakin said softly almost two hours later. Tahiri didn’t reply. “We should start walking again,” Anakin gently suggested. He stared at his friend. The strips of cloth she’d torn from the bottom of her jumpsuit and used to cover her head were crusted with sweat and sand. Hollow green eyes stared up at him. But he didn’t have an answer.

Suddenly Tahiri’s listless eyes flashed.

“Let me try to call Bangor again,” Tahiri said. “You try too, Anakin,” she instructed. “Maybe he’ll hear our voices calling if we work together.”

Anakin nodded. He didn’t have the heart to deny Tahiri’s request. Together they reached over the rolling dunes with their voices and called the bantha with the Force. They stood back to back, calling Bangor over and over again. Finally, they sat down in the sands, leaning against each other for support.

“Maybe we should sleep and then try again in a bit,” Tahiri murmured, her eyes already closed. Anakin huddled next to Tahiri as the night blanketed them with its cold threads. His last

Nancy Richardson

thought before sleep carried him away was that when he awoke it would be day seven.

"Quit it," Tahiri mumbled as a dry nose nudged her. Then her eyes shot open. Bangor stood above her, his brown eyes staring kindly down at his friend. From his neck dangled a thick rope that was frayed at the end. The bantha had broken his line to come to their rescue. Tahiri struggled up and hugged the bantha as he snuggled his head against her shoulder.

"Thank you, Bangor," she said softly. "Anakin, wake up and tell me if I'm still dreaming!" Tahiri cried to her friend.

"You're not dreaming!" Anakin croaked happily when he saw Bangor. Moments later the two Jedi candidates were on the bantha's back.

"Please take us to the tribe, Bangor," Tahiri said. The bantha began to lope across the sands. Anakin and Tahiri said little during the journey. Both were thinking about what fulfilling the promise meant. They had gained strength in the Force, and had learned that working together produced more powerful results than they had dreamed possible.

Bangor began to slow.

"Do you need some rest?" Tahiri asked the bantha. They had been loping across the desert for almost five hours. It was early evening, and Bangor had begun to weary. Now he quietly walked up a sand dune, coming to a rest only when he reached its crest.

"Is he all right?" Anakin asked Tahiri. But before she could answer, he saw why the bantha had stopped. Below them was Tahiri's tribe. Anakin could hear Vexa's words ringing above those of the rest of the Raiders. The tribe stood behind her. They appeared to be having some kind of meeting. Sliven stood apart from the Raiders. Only Tionne was by his side.

"What's Vexa saying?" Anakin whispered to Tahiri as they slid off Bangor and hid behind the dune.

"She's asking the tribe to declare us dead," Tahiri began to translate. "She says that when the suns set, seven days will have passed and we will have failed to return."

Sliven's deep bark interrupted Vexa.

"Sliven says that we still have two hours. He asks the tribe to wait," Tahiri explained.

Vexa began to grunt and bark angrily. She raised her gaderffii toward Sliven.

"She says Sliven is weak, and it is time he left the tribe forever." Tahiri rose and walked to the top of the dune. Anakin followed his friend.

"Stop," Tahiri barked.

All eyes turned to the crest of the dune. Vexa's disappointed cry couldn't be mistaken. Tahiri, Anakin, and Bangor made their way down the dune. Tahiri walked up to Vexa.

"There is no honor in your actions," she said. Then she turned to the rest of the tribe.

"We have returned before the suns set on the seventh day. Sliven is still your leader." The tribe members moved from Vexa to stand behind Sliven. A Raider brought two water jugs over to Anakin and Tahiri. Tahiri cupped some water in her hands and held them out to Bangor. The bantha drank deeply as Tahiri buried her face in the creature's thick fur.

"Thank you," she whispered. Bangor nuzzled against Tahiri, then moved back to the rest of the herd. After Anakin and Tahiri drank, Tahiri walked over to Sliven. Tionne joined Anakin, her worried eyes scanning his wounds. There would be time to talk about what had happened later, Pionne thought. For now, it was enough that Anakin and Tahiri were alive. Together Anakin and Tionne watched as Tahiri spoke softly to Sliven.

"He said that he's glad in his heart that I survived," Tahiri explained when she returned. "He hopes that all my worry about who I am has ended. In his mind, I'm a Raider. And he believes I should stay with my tribe."

"And what do you believe?" Anakin asked. His heart skipped a beat. If Tahiri stayed on Tatooine, he would lose his best friend, and alone he might not be able to break the curse of the

Nancy Richardson

golden globe. Still, he wouldn't try to sway her decision. She had to do what was right for her.

"I'm glad we succeeded," Tahiri softly began. "I now understand that I was never a Tusken Raider. The skills we both used to survive weren't the skills of a Raider. We used the Force. And now I know that I'm meant to attend the academy. To grow strong, and to use that strength to break the curse of the golden globe, and one day become a Jedi Knight."

"What about Sliven? Won't you miss him?" Anakin asked.

"That's the hardest part," Tahiri said sadly. "I love Sliven, but I know that I belong at the Jedi academy, not with the Sand People."

"Then let us leave here," Tionne said. "I've got to do one last thing," Tahiri said quietly. Anakin watched as his friend walked back to Sliven and told him her decision. The Raider nodded once, then reached inside his robes. He held out a roughly shaped pendant. In its center was his thumbprint. Tahiri unclasped the chain from her neck and threaded the gift through it. When she reclasped her chain, two sand-colored pendants hung from it. On them were the prints of her parents-all three of them.

"You will always be a part of me," Tahiri said softly to Sliven. "In my heart, you're my father. Please take care of Bangor for me-he's yours, just like I'm yours," she whispered, swallowing a lump in her throat. Tahiri moved forward and wrapped her arms around Sliven's waist. The Raider hugged his daughter back.

Chapter Fourteen

Anakin awoke with his side on fire-the gashes from the krayt dragon were now infected stripes of oozing yellow pus. Tionne sat by his side, placing a cold compress to his forehead and medicating his cuts. Old Peckhum clucked and worried as he guided the *Lightning Rod* back to Yavin 4. Anakin knew the old supply courier had been upset by his and Tahiri's appearance when they'd returned to his ship from the desert.

"We're both fine," Anakin had reassured him.

But he allowed Peckhum to help him into the supply ship, wincing in pain as he was lowered onto a sleeping pad. Tahiri and Tionne sat beside him the entire return trip. Anakin drifted in and out of consciousness, burning with fever.

So much has happened, Anakin thought as the ship sped through the atmosphere. Only a week ago, I wondered if Tahiri and I were ready to attempt to enter the golden globe and free the Massassi children. Now I know that we're strong enough.... Together we've used the Force to escape a giant tentacled creature, befriended Jawas with help from the Force, and defeated a krayt dragon. Anakin's thoughts swirled with dizziness, fever, and fatigue. He did not even hear Peckhum's voice signaling that they would soon land on Yavin 4.

Nancy Richardson

Luke Skywalker waited for the *Lightning Rod's* cargo bay to open. Slowly the massive jaws of the bay yawned wide, revealing Luke's nephew and Tahiri. Luke was pleased to see that the girl had returned. She belonged at the Jedi academy. He moved forward to greet the Jedi candidates.

"Welcome home—" Master Luke began. But his words caught in his throat as he stared at his students. Anakin struggled to stand and walk down the cargo bay's ramp. Old Peckhum held one of his arms tightly, steadying him as he walked. Anakin took several tottering steps, then fell forward. Luke anticipated his nephew's collapse, and caught the boy in his arms.

Gently he lowered Anakin to the ground. Anakin's academy jumpsuit was shredded on one side, revealing five gashes. There were dark circles under his eyes, and bruises were visible on his neck and hands. Tahiri knelt by her friend. The girl did not look much better, Luke thought in dismay. Spots of dried blood lined her jumpsuit in a pattern that looked like jaw marks. She, too, looked tired and hungry.

Luke's eyes met Tionne's for a brief moment. From her look of torment, he knew she'd tried her best to protect the children.

"Hi, Uncle Luke," Anakin said with a small voice.

"What happened?" Luke asked in a voice full of worry.

"The Tusken Raiders had a little more in mind for me than just deciding whether or not to remain with the tribe," Tahiri replied.

"We'll talk later," Luke said quietly to Tionne. "Right now, you are both going to the medical droid." With that, he swept his nephew up in his arms and strode toward the turbolift, with Tahiri trailing.

Anakin awoke. He was lying in his room, a medical droid hovering in the corner, his uncle seated beside his bed. Anakin stared down at his ribs. They were bandaged in soft, white gauze.

"You're awake," Luke Skywalker said. Anakin smiled. "And you can smile; that's good," Luke said softly. His pale blue eyes reflected his concern.

“Is Tahiri all right?” Anakin asked.

“Yes,” Luke replied gravely. “And she told me what happened. If I’d known what the Raiders had in mind, I would never have allowed either of you to go to Tatooine. Sliven gave his word that neither of you would be harmed....” Luke’s voice trailed off.

“His word was worth more than you know,” Anakin said in Sliven’s defense. “Tahiri chose to fulfill Sliven’s promise—he didn’t force her,” Anakin added. Anakin saw a look of doubt shadow his uncle’s face. “It was something she had to do,” he tried to explain. “I don’t think she could have returned to the academy if she hadn’t... and I couldn’t let her go alone.”

“Your mother wanted me to send you home,” Master Luke said, changing the subject. “Han and I persuaded her to let you stay at the academy. You’re bruised, you haven’t had enough water, and those gashes were infected,” Luke said, pointing to Anakin’s ribs, “but there wasn’t any serious damage.”

“How long have I been sleeping?” Anakin asked.

“Two days,” his uncle replied. Anakin tried to sit up, and fell back as a sickening wave of dizziness washed over him. “It’s going to take a few more days before you’re ready to get up,” Luke said gently.

Anakin settled back against his pillows. He didn’t like the idea of waiting. The time to break the curse was already thousands of years overdue. But a day or two more wouldn’t matter. And Anakin knew that he’d need all his strength to enter the globe and free the children. He resolved to get well quickly.

Luke Skywalker studied the intensity of Anakin’s ice blue eyes. He understood all too well that his nephew and Tahiri were tied together by more than their bond of friendship. They were true Jedi, and someday they would become powerful Jedi Knights. From what Tahiri had told him of their adventures on Tatooine, they were already well on their way. But, he worried that these two Jedi candidates were in the habit of rushing headlong into dangerous situations.

Nancy Richardson

What if they found themselves in one they weren't ready for?

"Regardless of whether or not Tahiri needed to learn her history, it was foolhardy to risk your lives in the deserts of Tatooine," Luke Skywalker said softly. He watched Anakin's face fall, and couldn't continue his attempt to rein in his nephew. "Still, you used your minds and the Force well."

So well, Luke thought in amazement, that he could hardly fathom the strength still to be developed in the candidates. Anakin's face beamed up at his uncle.

"Now get well, or Leia will never forgive me," Luke instructed. Luke Skywalker sat beside his nephew as he slept. He wondered if the strange feeling of untold danger he'd sensed before sending the children to Tatooine had been a premonition of the promise Tahiri had chosen to keep. Luke closed his eyes and breathed a sigh of relief. At least the children were safe.

Chapter Fifteen

He was in the depths of the Palace of the Woolamander. The damp, rotting smell of evil flowed in invisible currents along the crumbling stones. He moved toward the small room, bathed by a sickly sweet smell that oozed around his head, filled his ears, and attempted to enter his mouth. Still, he was calm.

He knew what had to be done. When he reached the room, he walked toward the crystal sphere. The swirling golden sands cast a yellow gleam along his extended arm. He opened his hand and placed his right palm on the surface of the globe. A jolt of pain began at his fingertips and traveled the length of his arm in a white-hot torrent. And then the voices began.

“You will fail,” they called from the darkness. “You will be swallowed by the dark side. Swallowed into the belly of evil, where you will live forever, tortured and twisting in agony. It doesn’t have to be that way, boy,” a single voice said from the darkness.

He recognized it. It was the evil follower of Exar Kun. The being that had haunted his dreams.

“Join us now, and the glory of the dark side will be yours. You already belong to us,” the figure hissed. “You just don’t know it yet.” He let the voice fall from him, until it lay in an oily black pool at his feet. Then he extended his other palm to the globe,

Nancy Richardson

and let the now familiar pain cascade through his left arm. This time it did not stop at his shoulder. Instead, it continued to course through his body, wrapping his torso in a vice grip of pain.

"I am coming," Anakin called out to the children inside the globe through clenched teeth. "I am coming, and nothing can stop me."

"Anakin?" Tahiri called from the side of his sleeping pad. "Anakin? Are you all right?"

Slowly, Anakin woke. He stared up into the worried eyes of his friend. She looked better. There were still traces of bluish rungs beneath her eyes, and her sunburned face was beginning to peel, but the light was back in her emerald green eyes.

"Are you all right?" Tahiri bubbled. Without waiting for an answer, she continued. "I was so worried. I mean I was pretty sick too, but Master Luke said that you had an infection and a fever. Do you still have one-a fever, I mean?"

Anakin grinned. He hadn't heard Tahiri's customary chatter since they'd begun their adventure on Tatooine. It was nice to see that she was back to normal.

"Bantha got your tongue?" Tahiri teased.

"As usual, I was just waiting for the chance to get a word in edgewise," Anakin replied.

Slowly, he sat up. He felt better, much better. He moved toward the open window and stared out into the jungle. "Are you ready, Tahiri?" he finally asked.

"Yes," Tahiri replied from behind him.

"Are you?" Anakin nodded.

"Are you certain you are strong enough?" a deep, raspy voice called from the corner of the room.

It was Ikrit. The Jedi Master, his white fur and the stones of the Great Temple strangely blending, scurried from the corner and leapt onto the window ledge. "After all," he rasped, "this is only one battle of good versus evil. There will be others, if you are not up to the fight."

Anakin stared into Ikrit's round, brown eyes. Eyes that told nothing. Eyes that waited passively for their decision.

"There are some battles that have to be fought, regardless of the risks or odds. Light versus dark, good versus evil. Those battles can't be ignored,"

Anakin said softly.

"What if we're not strong enough?"

Tahiri asked with uneasy concern.

"I believe that we are," Anakin replied. "If we ignore the workings of the dark side of the Force, then we allow evil to triumph. And if that happens, it won't just mean the lives of the children trapped within the globe-it will cast a shadow of darkness on our own lives."

Tahiri nodded.

"Evil can't be ignored," she agreed. "Regardless of the risks."

"Then may the Force be with you," Master Ikrit rasped.

With that, he scurried out the window, made his way down the pyramid-shaped wall of the Great Temple, and disappeared into the jungles of Yavin 4.

"I guess Master Ikrit won't be coming with us," Tahiri said.

"We're on our own," Anakin added softly. "Whatever happens, we're on our own."

Anakin turned back to the jungles and let the sweet scent fill him. He thought about his dream, and what it meant. It was the second time he had dreamed about the follower of Exar Kun. The second time he'd defeated Kun's follower by using the Force to control his inner self and make the evil figure's threats useless.

Anakin only hoped he'd be able to do the same in the Palace of the Woolamander. There was no doubt in his mind that the spirits of Kun's evil followers would be there for real, attempting to stop them from breaking the curse and freeing the globe's children, trying to turn Tahiri and him to the dark side.

And what about entering the globe? Anakin wondered. Had his dream been right? Was it a matter of enduring the pain of the

Nancy Richardson

powerful field until it lost its strength and let Anakin inside the sphere? Anakin turned to Tahiri to tell her about his dream, and to try to figure out how they were going to lead the Massassi children to freedom. They were in this together, and they would succeed together, or never leave the palace alive.

Chapter Sixteen

They knew the way. Hidden by darkness, Tahiri and Anakin raced through the jungles of Yavin 4. The first time they'd snuck out of the Great Temple to raft the river, they hadn't known where they were going. This time, they were guided by their memories and their convictions. They felt the weight of the Palace of the Woolamander before it loomed above them, a crumbling site of darkness and buried evil. Neither spoke as they entered an opening that had once been a majestic portal, or when they saw the familiar Massassi symbols carved along the walls of the palace.

The time for talk or solving riddles was long past. The time for action was at hand. Anakin flashed his light beam toward a broken wall that hid the crumbling stairway they'd descended a month before. Several large woolamanders scurried out of the hole and into the darkness. Neither Anakin nor Tahiri jumped in surprise. There were bigger things to be afraid of.

"Ready?" Anakin asked Tahiri.

She moved forward and climbed through a hole in the crumbling wall. Anakin followed. Hand in hand, they began to descend the spiral stairway. The voices began.

Nancy Richardson

“Go back,” they called as the Jedi candidates climbed down the stairs. “This is a dark place; you are not welcome here,” they rumbled.

“We’ve been here, and heard that before,” Tahiri shot into the darkness. “It didn’t work the first time, so just give it a rest.”

“Orphan child, you cannot break the curse,” a voice said from the darkness.

“Now that’s new,” Tahiri murmured under her breath. She and Anakin continued to descend.

“Orphan child, you are a sister of the darkness,” the voice hissed to Tahiri. “We are your family; your home is with us. Leave the boy. He is not one of us. He doesn’t care about you.”

Anakin recognized the voice from his dreams. He felt Tahiri’s anger growing.

“Tahiri, that’s what they want,” he whispered urgently. “They want you to strike out against them, to use the Force in aggression. Remember, a Jedi never acts from anger, hatred, or aggression.”

“Your mother, Cassa, was one of us. So was your father, Tryst,” the voice lied. “Join them and finally understand who you really are.”

“I am Tahiri Veila, daughter of Cassa and Tryst,” Tahiri began softly as she and Anakin continued to descend. “I’m Tahiri, chosen daughter of Sliven of the Tusken Raiders. My path is one of light. I am a Jedi candidate.”

Anakin felt Tahiri’s anger ebbing. Her hand, which had moments before clung tightly to his, relaxed.

“Boy,” a familiar voice called from the gloom. “You aren’t like your little friend. You are part of the history of the dark side. Your grandfather, Anakin Skywalker, served Emperor Palpatine well. The seed of evil is planted within you. It is your birthright—don’t fight it,” the voice insisted.

Anakin felt the words slither around his body like snakes. All the fear he had about who he was, and the burden of carrying the name “Anakin,” fought to rise to the surface. He felt an

overwhelming need to strike out against the evil follower of Kun. But instead, he laughed. It was a small laugh at first, but it grew stronger as Tahiri joined in. And the louder the Jedi students laughed, the weaker the voice became, until it went out, like a flame before a hearty wind. Anakin and Tahiri reached the base of the stairs and walked toward the doorway they'd entered before to discover the globe.

But nothing could have prepared them for what they saw and heard.

Nothing.

The children were crying. Anakin could hear their strangled sobs the moment he stepped inside the room. Countless ghostlike hands were pressed against the inside of the globe, torn away by the madly swirling sands, only to reappear moments later in silent pleas for help.

"The followers of Exar Kun are trying to destroy the children before we can free them," Anakin said in horror.

Tahiri ran toward the globe before Anakin could stop her, and struck it with her fists. The field repelled her efforts, tossing her through the air. Her body somersaulted once, then struck the stone wall. Anakin raced over to his friend, who lay crumpled on the floor. He helped her to sit up, and watched as she shook her head slowly from side to side to clear it from the blow. Tahiri looked up at Anakin with agonized green eyes.

"They're dying in there!" she cried. "Anakin, we've got to do something!"

Chapter Seventeen

The pain that extended from the globe through Anakin's right palm and across his chest was sheer agony. He fought to remain standing, to absorb the field as it coursed through his body like white lightning, to make it harmless. His legs buckled from the torture, and he fell to his knees. Tahiri leapt forward and tore her friend from the field's stranglehold. They both fell back, Anakin breathing in rattled gasps as the pain slowly subsided.

"There's got to be another way!" Tahiri said. "What if we both focus on using the Force to weaken the field," Tahiri thought out loud. "Anakin, you did it when you weakened the reel on Yavin 8," she continued. "Once the field is weak enough, we can both enter the globe and find the children."

"You're right, Tahiri," Anakin replied, rising to his feet. "But I don't think we should go inside together. We have no idea what it's like inside the globe. If one of us fails, the other needs to be able to help, or to go get help if there's no other choice."

Tahiri nodded.

"I want to go in first," Anakin said softly. The hard glint in his eyes told Tahiri there could be no arguing. Anakin moved toward the globe. Tahiri stood by his side. There were no more words. Both knew what had to be done. They closed their eyes and reached out to the field with the Force. The field sparked and

flared as their minds tried to weaken it. Anakin felt sweat roll down his forehead. His back cramped with effort. And, just when he almost began to lose hope, he felt a tiny weakening in the field.

“It’s working,” Anakin said through clenched teeth.

Tahiri squeezed his hand. She could feel it, too. Moments later, the field’s strength flickered, then faded to a soft buzz in Anakin’s mind. Without pausing, he reached toward the smooth sphere. He felt his hands pass through the crystal, felt the stinging of the golden sands on his flesh.

It’s now or never, Anakin thought. He plunged forward, his body entering the globe, then disappearing from view in the swirling sands. He felt a sharp bolt of pain as his right foot slid inside the sphere. The field had regained its power. It’s like swimming through sand, Anakin thought as he fought his way through the whirlpool of golden particles. The sands stung and blinded him, and he covered his nose and mouth with the sleeve of his jumpsuit so that he could breathe. Then he began to search for the children.

Strange, Anakin thought; from the outside, the globe is no more than four meters across, but inside it’s huge. Anakin blindly struggled to find his way through the globe. His body was tossed and tumbled in the mad whirls of sand until he no longer knew up from down. He cried out to the children, but there was no answer.

And then there they were, crowding around him, their small hands reaching out, grasping the folds of his jumpsuit, touching his face, his hair. There were so many of them, Anakin wondered how he could lead them all out of the globe.

“Grab hands!” he called out. “All of you, grab hands.”

They understood, and he felt two small hands slide into his. Anakin battled through the storm as the sands filled his nose and mouth and threatened to choke him. He had to lead them to the edge of the crystal, through the field, he thought, his legs struggling as the sands thickened.

Nancy Richardson

“Help me, Tahiri!” Anakin cried into the deafening churn and the sea of frightened cries. He fell, and the sands tossed him in a dizzying rush.

Chapter Eighteen

“Anakin, where are you!” Tahiri screamed as her friend’s fear reached out from the globe and filled her senses. There was no answer.

“This is not the way it’s going to end!” she cried into the darkness. “Anakin!” Tahiri called over and over with her voice and the Force. A glimpse of his orange jumpsuit appeared, then disappeared as the sands violently whirled. “Anakin, I’m here!” Tahiri cried.

Anakin heard Tahiri’s voice through the sands, and struggled toward it, his hands still firmly clenching the small hands of two Massassi children. He pressed forward, toward Tahiri’s cries, until he ran headlong into the crystal. Anakin pressed the backs of his hands against the globe, letting the pain of the field course down his arms until he was certain that Tahiri had seen him.

Then he focused on the field, once again using the Force to weaken it. He sensed Tahiri joining her strength with his. Sands wrapped around Anakin’s legs like the tentacles of the creature on Tatooine and tried to draw him back into the center of the globe. Anakin fought to keep his footing, to concentrate on weakening the field. But he was growing tired, and the current was close to toppling him and breaking his resolve. Before him the field’s strength began to flicker and falter.

Nancy Richardson

There was no more time to wait. Anakin reached forward, ignoring the ripples of pain that ran down his arms and made him cry out. He thrust his fists through the field, feeling the dank air of the chamber beyond. Anakin forged ahead, pushing through the field with the last of his strength, absorbing its weakened power in dull aches and hot flashes. Suddenly he was through, his hands drawing the children behind him in a steady stream.

Anakin forced his mind back to the field, joining Tahiri in a last effort to weaken its power as the children streamed from the globe, hand in hand. Minutes later it was over, the last child emerging from the globe's cursed grasp. Anakin sank to the stone floor.

"You're free," Tahiri said softly to the countless children who crowded the chamber. Their small, spiritlike forms were almost transparent. Cloaked in white robes outlined in shimmering blue, they stood silently before the Jedi candidates.

"Do you think they understand?" Tahiri asked as she sat down beside Anakin.

"They understand," Anakin answered, sensing the children's growing wonderment and joy. One of them walked toward the Jedi candidates. He reached out a small hand and gently touched both of their faces. Anakin felt the brush of a feather across his cheek at the touch. Then the Massassi child bowed and moved back to the other children. Slowly they all began to fade from sight, until the last glimmering blue outline disappeared. They had finally returned to their people.

The curse was broken; the children were freed from their imprisonment.

"Do you feel it?" Anakin asked Tahiri.

Tahiri nodded. "Peace to all," she replied softly.

As Tahiri and Anakin moved to leave the chamber, they heard a sharp sound behind them, and whirled. The golden globe was cracking, its surface lined with running veins of white. Then, in an instant, the sphere broke into a thousand shards of crystal,

and the golden glitter which had once filled it spilled out into the chamber, now just lifeless yellow sand.

Anakin and Tahiri left the Palace of the Woolamander. Their eyes quickly adjusted from the gloom to the soft morning light of the jungle. And to the figure of Jedi Master Luke Skywalker as he stood on the crumbling stone steps of the palace,

Master Ikrit by his side. Luke Skywalker studied Anakin and Tahiri. His face conveyed relief at seeing the two Jedi candidates safe.

“The curse is broken?” Luke asked softly.

“Yes,” Anakin answered his uncle.

“You have both done well,” Ikrit rasped, his big brown eyes gleaming in pride at Tahiri and Anakin.

“You know everything?” Anakin asked his uncle, gesturing toward Ikrit.

Luke Skywalker nodded. He wrapped his arms around Anakin’s and Tahiri’s shoulders.

“I am very proud,” Luke said, his eyes meeting theirs.

Slowly the group walked back toward the Jedi academy. For the first time in a long time, Anakin and Tahiri were not heading toward danger, but simply toward the future-adventure, the Force, and their ultimate goal: to become Jedi Knights.

Book Four
Anakin's Quest

PROLOGUE

Anakin Solo watched as stars popped into focus in the blackness all around him. Beside him his father, Han Solo, piloted the *Millennium Falcon*.

"Not a bad hyperspace jump, if I do say so myself," Han said with a grin. "You worried about anything?" Anakin gave the question serious thought. He wasn't sure he knew the answer.

"Why?"

"You seemed kinda quiet on your visit at home - more quiet than usual, I mean. Mom wondered if anything was bothering you. Even with all the work she does running the New Republic, your mom notices these things, you know." Anakin's mother, Leia Organa Solo, was the head of the New Republic's government.

Anakin blinked out the viewport at the stars.

They seemed to blink back at him like a million silver-eyed creatures watching him in the night.

"I don't know what's wrong," Anakin said at last. They both fell silent for a while.

"There it is," Han Solo said at last, pointing at the small jungle moon of Yavin 4.

Rebecca Moesta

Anakin nodded. He would soon be back on Yavin 4 at the Jedi academy, where his uncle Luke Skywalker trained students to use the Force.

"You know, kid," Han Solo began, "you're still pretty young to be going off to school like this a couple of months at a time. Maybe it wasn't a good idea to start your training so early. Jacen and Jaina were a bit older when they started at the Jedi academy. You don't really have to go back yet. If you wanted, you could stay home for another year or so. Your choice."

Anakin watched the jungle moon grow bigger in the front viewport. He smiled at the mention of his brother and sister. Sometimes he felt older than the twins, in spite of the year-and-a-half difference between his age and theirs. He felt as if there was an oldness deep inside his mind. It was something he couldn't explain—not even to himself. He wanted to understand the strange feeling he had, and the strange dreams that visited him each night.

"Thanks, Dad," Anakin said at last. "It's good to know I have a choice. But I want to go back to the Jedi academy. I miss you and Mom when I'm away, but I see Jacen and Jaina almost as much on Yavin 4 as I do at home. Besides, I have my friends Tahiri and Ikrit, and Uncle Luke watches out for me. Don't worry, I'll be fine." But Anakin's words were more sure than he felt.

"Okay, son," Han Solo said. "Back to school it is."

Hours later, Anakin stood beside his uncle Luke Skywalker and the barrel-shaped droid Artoo-Detoo, waving goodbye as the *Millennium Falcon* took off. The blast from the repulsorjets blew their hair around their faces and into their eyes.

Blond hair and brown. Light and dark.

Anakin wondered if the light and darkness meant anything

As if he understood the direction of Anakin's thoughts, Luke Skywalker put a hand on his nephew's shoulder. "I have to get

STAR WARS: Anakin's Quest

back to my other students now," he said, "but I think we need to talk. Let me know when you're ready." "

Artoo-Detoo beeped once to show that he agreed. Anakin watched in silence as the Jedi Master walked back to the pyramid-shaped temple that held the Jedi academy. The ancient stone blocks of the Great Temple seemed older than he remembered. Colder, darker

Anakin shivered. When he figured out what was bothering him, he would talk to his uncle. He hoped it would be soon.

Chapter One

Anakin pushed a fringe of dark hair away from his ice blue eyes and looked around. Something felt different here at the Jedi academy. The ancient stone walls of his student quarters still looked the same. After all, he had only been gone three months. The room seemed no different than it had on the day he had left. Everything was in its place: the wooden chest that held his clothes, the small table and chair in the corner near the window slit, the narrow but comfortable sleeping pallet. The room was not large, but it held everything he needed, and he had always found comfort here. But today it all seemed strange somehow.

Anakin walked to the window and leaned against the thick stone ledge. He looked out to where the lush green jungles crept close to the Jedi academy. He wondered if Ikrit was somewhere out there right now. Ikrit was a white furry creature with floppy ears whom Anakin and his friend Tahiri had found sleeping beside a golden globe in a nearby temple ruin. With Ikrit's help, Anakin and Tahiri had discovered the secret necessary to free a group of trapped spirits from the mysterious globe. So far, only Anakin, his uncle Luke, and Tahiri knew that Anakin's "pet" was really a Jedi Master.

Rebecca Moesta

Ikrit was not ready to tell everyone who he was, so he had decided not to go home with Anakin for his visit. After their adventures, Ikrit had chosen to stay on Yavin 4.

“I have much to consider,” the furry Jedi Master had said. “I will stay here and think.”

Anakin sighed and shook his head. He felt restless and strange, but the jungle didn’t seem to hold the answer to what was bothering him. Maybe he only felt odd because he was back at the Jedi academy and he hadn’t seen his friend Tahiri yet. Tahiri was two years younger than Anakin and had been adopted at the age of three by Sand People on the desert planet Tatooine after her parents were killed in a raid. About a year ago, the Jedi instructor Tionne had met Tahiri, discovered she was strong in the Force, and brought her to study at the Jedi academy. Anakin sat down on his sleeping pallet, his back against the wall, knees pulled up to his chin.

Letting his eyes fall half shut, he reached out with the Force, trying to find the source of his worry. He clasped his hands around his legs and rested his chin on one knee. Maybe Master Ikrit would be able to sense the cause of his anxiety. Or Uncle Luke.

Maybe... Darkness. Light. White mist rising against inky black, as it might in a swamp at nighttime. The air around him crackled with energy. Maybe his eyes had adjusted, for there was no light, but suddenly he saw the figures. Although they had never met, he knew who they were: Emperor Palpatine, and Darth Vader. The Emperor's face was wrinkled and marked by the dark powers he loved to use. Shrouded in shadowy robes, the Emperor's face showed a sickly, greenish white.

The shriveled lips moved, and Anakin heard a rasping voice say, “Come, my child.”

Darth Vader stepped forward and threw a black cloak around Anakin's shoulders. Vader's mechanical breathing echoed in Anakin's ears, but he could not take his eyes off the Emperor.

A story. He had heard a story-or was it only a story? - about the Emperor. According to the tale, the Emperor's clone had touched Leia's

STAR WARS: Anakin's Quest

stomach not long before Anakin was born and had claimed the child for the dark side of the Force.... Now, Darth Vader pressed a lightsaber into Anakin's hand. Vader's cape swirled about him as he lifted something high, high over Anakin, as if to place a crown on his head.

Anakin looked up.

A helmet. A dark helmet. Black as a starless night. Anakin backed away, wordlessly shaking his head. He threw the lightsaber with a clatter to the floor and tore the dark folds of billowing cloth from his shoulders.

"Come, my child," the Emperor rasped again. "You cannot resist your destiny. It will always be inside you."

Anakin opened his mouth and tried to say, "No, I'll never follow you!" but no sound came out.

Vader stretched out his arms. The fallen cloak and lightsaber sprang to his hands, as though they were pets beckoned by their master.

Anakin wanted to run, but his feet would not move.

The Emperor motioned with one finger, and a wave of sleepiness swept over Anakin.

"Take what your grandfather has to offer," the raspy voice said. "We have always been a part of you...."

Darth Vader flung the black cape at Anakin, but this time not around his shoulders. The dark cloth covered his head completely. Anakin grappled with it, trying to fling it aside. It fought back, as if it had a life of its own. Still struggling, Anakin fell down, down, down into blackness.

"Anakin," a voice said. Not the voice of the Emperor.

A hand grasped his shoulder. Not the hand of Darth Vader.

"Anakin, wake up. It's me!"

Covers were yanked aside and Anakin found himself blinking up at a pair of sparkling green eyes surrounded by a fall of silky pale yellow hair.

"Tahiri!"

"Well, it's not much of a greeting for your best friend, but I suppose at least it's something," Tahiri said, pretending to be insulted.

"Oh, uh-hi!" Anakin pushed himself up to a sitting position, feeling a bit sheepish. "What are you doing here?"

Rebecca Moesta

“Well, our ship just landed. Tionne and I had been out exploring—you remember, looking for old Jedi records? Well, Anyway, we just got back from this strange planet where there were little spiky weeds all over the ground. I even had to wear shoes.” She made a terrible face. “You *know* how I hate that. We went into a treasure vault. There was no treasure, but we did find some holo cubes and some written records. Anyway, we brought them back here, and who should come out to meet our ship but Ikrit? He said you needed me right away, so naturally I had to come, and Tionne said said...”

Anakin felt a warm glow as the girl’s words rushed past him. She could be quite a chatterbox and terribly exasperating sometimes, but Tahiri was, without a doubt, his best friend.

“... and so I told her that I would bring you with me and we could start training again right away. Well, aren’t you going to say anything? Tionne is waiting for us.”

Patches of mist still clung to Anakin’s mind.

“What? Who?” Tahiri giggled.

“*Tionne*. You know—long silver hair, big pearly eyes, Jedi historian? The one who found me on Tatooine?”

“Yes.. I know who Tionne is,” Anakin said, his groggy mind not catching her point.

“Well, she’s waiting for us. Ikrit is with her. We’re starting lessons again right away.”

Anakin let Tahiri grab his hand and drag him off the sleeping pallet. He’d been napping in his clothes. But he made Tahiri wait while he put his shoes on. Then she hurried him out the door.

“Are you feeling okay, Anakin? You don’t look too good. I guess that’s to be expected, though. After all, Ikrit did say you needed me. Well, I’m here now, and I think everything is going to be just fine. Anyway, remember that treasure vault I was telling you about? It seems that...”

Anakin had to admit that he did feel a little bit better as he followed his friend down the passageway, watching her bare feet

STAR WARS: Anakin's Quest

pad softly on the cool flagstones. As the dream faded, he realized it had served a purpose. At least now he knew what was wrong.

Chapter Two

A light breeze blew from across the river toward the Jedi academy, carrying with it the cool moistness of early evening. A thick blanket of white mist clung to the riverbank and swirled around Anakin's and Tahiri's knees as they walked. The mist was so thick, in fact, that it hid nearly all of Master Ikrit except for his head and floppy ears. The white-furred creature waited patiently beside Tionne.

Ikrit was obviously as pleased to see Anakin as Anakin was to see the little Jedi Master. He climbed nimbly onto Anakin's shoulder and draped his tail around Anakin's neck.

"I think he's glad to see you," Tionne said in her beautiful musical voice.

"We all are."

The breeze blew around them and stirred the white vapor so that Tionne's fine silvery hair looked as though it might have been spun from the mist itself.

"So what are we going to learn tonight?" Tahiri asked.

She sounded excited. She grinned at Anakin.

"I've been begging Tionne for three months to give me more lessons, but she wouldn't. She said I was too young to study all the time and that I needed to take a break." Tahiri snorted. "As if I wanted to take a break from studying the Force."

STAR WARS: Anakin's Quest

Tionne said nothing. She lit a torch that she had brought with her from the Great Temple and then winked at Anakin as if they shared a secret—that sometimes it was best not to answer Tahiri, that it was enough just to listen. The Jedi instructor's huge mother-of-pearl eyes shimmered in the flickering light of the torch she held.

Tionne closed her eyes halfway and Anakin could sense the Force flowing through her. Then, to his amazement, the ground mist wrapped itself around her, spiraling and climbing upward. The mist wound itself like a vine around her arm and the base of the torch.

Finally, the mist circled the tip of the torch in a glowing white halo. As the fire burned away the water vapor, more mist drifted up to join the hazy ring. Anakin found himself fascinated by this display. It wasn't until Tahiri said,

“Wow!” that he realized it was over.

“Now it's your turn,” Tionne said. “This may be a bit new and strange to you. It might surprise you how hard it can be. You've practiced lifting objects before, heavy things and light things. But mist is not an object.”

Ikrit jumped down from Anakin's shoulder and sat near Tionne, swirling the mist with one small paw.

“Mist has no top or bottom,” Tionne continued. “There are no sides to hold on to with your mind. It has no real size that you can grasp. Mist is more difficult to move than an object, and much harder to control.”

When Anakin saw Tahiri's brows draw together in concentration and her lips press into a firm line, he rolled his eyes up and to one side, as he often did when he was thinking or solving a puzzle. He reached out with the Force, tried to sense the mist. He patted the mist with his mind, pushed it, swished it. Nothing happened. He heard a sound of surprise from Tahiri.

“Did I do it? Oh. No, it was just the breeze.”

“Do not try to hold on to the mist,” Tionne cautioned. “It cannot be held. You must use the Force. Trust the Force.”

Rebecca Moesta

Anakin took a deep breath and relaxed. His eyes fell half shut. He let himself *feel* the mist. Its moisture was in the cool air that touched his cheeks and in each breath that he took. It was all around him. It flowed. He found that his mind could flow with it. He heard Tahiri's voice beside him whisper:

"Oh! Yes, I see," but he was too swept up in the flow of the mist to watch what she was doing. He let his mind flow into a pattern, the first one that came into his head—a small tree. Suddenly, there before him, through his half-open eyes, he could see it: a small, transparent, but perfectly formed tree. Then, beside his tree he saw a misty replica of the Great Temple appear. Tahiri had added her own mist picture next to his.

Amused, Anakin let the mist flow again. This time he decided to form the shape of his father's ship, the *Millennium Falcon*. Within seconds Tahiri made a little X-wing fighter to hover beside the *Falcon*. Then her craft shifted and became a misty light-saber with a ghostly blade. Anakin let the *Millennium Falcon* flow and transform into a second phantomlike lightsaber beside Tahiri's.

The two energy blades drifted toward each other and crossed. Anakin and Tahiri both made a misty streamer shoot out from the point where the "lightsabers" touched, as if the clash had released a crackle of energy.

Mist swirled behind Anakin's blade as Tahiri's pulled back for another strike. But before they could cross their weapons again, Anakin's lightsaber dissolved and he cried out. He stumbled backward, slipped, and fell into the soft mud of the riverbank—for in the air in front of him, the mist had formed itself into the shriveled face of the Emperor himself, laughing at Anakin!

The bench in his uncle's office felt hard and cold, Anakin thought. The stone walls seemed icy. Even though he was wrapped in a blanket, he shivered. ArtooDetoo bumped softly against Anakin's knee and whistled a sad note. The R2 unit was designed to help pilots fly and make repairs in space. Artoo had

STAR WARS: Anakin's Quest

helped Luke twenty years ago when Luke flew as a fighter pilot against the Empire's giant space station, the Death Star. The little droid became Luke's companion and still stayed with him now that Luke was a Jedi Master.

"TYy to drink some soup; then we can talk," Luke Skywalker said, holding out a bowl of steaming liquid and sitting down beside Anakin. Anakin shut his eyes and shivered again. The steam reminded him of the river mist and of the laughing face of the Emperor. Without opening his eyes, he reached out, took the bowl, and drank the soup. Warmth flowed into him. Anakin calmed himself with a Jedi exercise that Luke had taught him.

"All right," he said at last, "I'm ready, Uncle Luke."

When he opened his eyes again, Luke Skywalker sat waiting, listening.

"Is it-" Anakin swallowed hard. "Is it true that my mother was touched by the Emperor before I was born?"

Luke Skywalker pursed his lips. A frown creased his forehead.

"A clone of the Emperor touched her," he said carefully. "That clone was a copy of the Emperor's body."

Anakin put down his soup bowl and cleared his throat.

"Sometimes I wonder if the Emperor didn't find a way to... infect me with the dark side of the Force."

Luke Skywalker smiled at this. A kind smile.

"What makes you think that?"

"Dreams," Anakin said, pushing dark bangs out of his ice blue eyes. "Dreams that the Emperor and my grandfather are calling me to the dark side of the Force."

"Your grandfather, Anakin Skywalker, was a good man-" Luke began. "But he became Darth Vader,"

Anakin broke in.

"Yes, he made that choice for a while. But at the end, and with his dying breath, Anakin Skywalker chose good over evil."

"What if the same thing happens to me? I may be destined to make the same mistakes that he did."

Rebecca Moesta

ArtooDetoo swiveled his domed head and buzzed twice. It sounded to Anakin almost like “uh-uh.” In the simple code that Anakin and Artoo had worked out, that meant he did not agree.

“No one can force you to choose the dark side,” Luke said.

“But how will I know that I’ll make the right choice? How do I know what’s inside me?”

“The Force is inside all of us. It flows through every living thing.”

“But the Force has a dark side *and* a light side,” Anakin insisted. “When did you first learn what was inside of you?”

Luke gave a soft laugh.

“My Jedi Master sent me into a cave.”

“And you saw what was in you?” Anakin asked hopefully.

“Yes... “

“Then I want to go into that cave too,” Anakin said. “I want to see what I have in me-whether I’ll choose the dark side or the light.”

“That cave is on Dagobah,” Luke said, sounding surprised.

“Then take me there, Uncle Luke,” Anakin said.

“I need to know.” Luke frowned. “I’m not sure that cave will tell you anything you can’t find out here.”

But Anakin was convinced now; he needed to go to Dagobah.

“I don’t think my dreams about turning to the dark side will go away until I go into that cave,” he said.

“But I can’t take you there,” Luke said softly. “I have too many other students, too many other jobs to do for the New Republic.”

“Then get me an X-wing,” Anakin said. “I’ll fly there myself if I have to.”

This brought a rich chuckle from Luke.

“I don’t think you’ll need to do that,” he said. “I’ll give it some thought and we’ll see what we can work out. Meanwhile, contact your parents and find out what they have to say.”

Luke Skywalker stood.

“And now, it’s getting late. Try to get some sleep,” he said.

STAR WARS: Anakin's Quest

“Old Peckhum will be here early in the morning, and I’d like you and Tahiri to help with unloading the supplies.”

ArtooDetoo made a few encouraging beeps and whistles.

Anakin smiled.

“Will you help us unload the ship too, Artoo?”

Artoo beeped once to mean yes.

“Good night,” Luke said, placing a hand lightly on Anakin’s shoulder. “I wish you a dreamless sleep.”

Chapter Three

Morning dawned bright and clear, without a trace of the previous evening's mist. The *Lightning Rod*, a rickety old supply shuttle, was just touching down when Tahiri and Anakin reached the landing field. The two youngest Jedi trainees trotted out to meet the ship. Tahiri enjoyed feeling the stubby grass against her bare feet and the wind blowing through her loose blond hair. She could see that Anakin felt better than he had last night, though he still seemed a bit worried. She could tell he was looking forward to unloading the shuttle as much as she was. It seemed to surprise everyone but Master Skywalker that Tahiri and Anakin always loved to be given a work assignment.

It didn't seem at all odd to Tahiri, though. What could be more interesting and fun than putting their Jedi powers to practical use? Watching the *Lightning Rod*'s exit ramp lower to the ground, Tahiri giggled.

"We'd better hurry and get the supplies unloaded. The ship looks like it could fall apart any minute." Anakin seemed to give this serious thought. He closed his ice blue eyes for a minute and then looked at Tahiri.

"The *Lightning Rod* is a sound ship," he said. "It may look rickety, but old Peckhum keeps it in good repair."

STAR WARS: Anakin's Quest

There was a loud thunk from inside the ship. The cargo hatch opened, and with a grinding wheeze another ramp came down. Tahiri arched an eyebrow at Anakin.

"Sure sounds rickety to me."

Anakin understood machines in a way Tahiri found almost spooky. Maybe it was because he had learned how to solve puzzles at an early age-and machines had so many pieces that fit together to make them work, it was almost like a puzzle.

Anakin shrugged.

"I can *feel* it. Trust me: this ship could make the Kessel Run right now if she had to."

More clanking sounds came from inside the ship. Probably the pilot shutting down some equipment. *Probably*. Tahiri chuckled.

"Okay, I believe you." She rolled her eyes. "You and your machines."

As if in answer to her call, she heard a series of whistles and beeps coming from behind her.

"Good morning, Artoo," Anakin said. "Glad you could make it."

Tahiri turned to see the little silver, blue, and white droid rolling across the landing field toward them.

"Oh, good," she said. "You can keep track of the cargo list while Anakin and I unload."

Just then a longhaired man in a rumpled jumpsuit thumped down the cargo ramp.

"Hi, Peckhum," Anakin said.

ArtooDetoo warbled a hello.

"Good morning, Peckhum," Tahiri added.

"Well, if it isn't young Anakin Solo," the old spacer said, "and my favorite R2 unit in all the galaxy."

Artoo made an embarrassed-sounding bleep at Peckhum's compliment.

"And good morning to you, too, little Tahiri," the pilot said.

Rebecca Moesta

“How was your flight? Is the cargo ready to unload?” Tahiri asked. She had grown up with the quiet, mysterious Sand People on Tatooine, and since leaving there, she loved to talk. “Did you bring anything unusual?” she rushed on. “Master Skywalker assigned us to help you in any way we can. We’ll stay as long as you need us. Will that be okay?”

Peckhum gave a loud belly laugh, “Yep, that’ll do just fine. Why don’t we get started with this unloading.”

Peckhum transferred his cargo list into a datapad for ArtooDetoo and headed toward the Great Temple to deliver some messages to Luke Skywalker.

For the next two hours Tahiri and Anakin unloaded supplies. Each of them would concentrate on a crate or piece of equipment and, using the Force, raise it twenty or thirty centimeters off the deck - plates onto a floating platform called a repulsorsled. Then they steered the floating sleds out the hatch and down the cargo ramp. Outside, ArtooDetoo recorded the cargo codes and checked the items off the list on his datapad.

As young as she was, Tahiri had strong muscles, but she would never have been able to lift a single one of the cargo crates without using the Force. Even using the Force, the work was hard. Tahiri perspired from the concentration it took to lift the bulky objects onto repulsorsleds and steer them out of the cargo hold. At one point, Tahiri stepped on a sliver of wood that had broken off from one of the crates. She was so distracted by the sharp sting that she let the box drop back to the floor of the cargo hold. It missed her bare foot by only a centimeter.

Anakin fumbled once, too. He was floating a bundle of cloth so that ArtooDetoo could record the item on his list when all of a sudden some folds of dark material blew over him, covering his face. Anakin let go of the repulsorsled with a yell of surprise and backed away from it.

Tahiri could sense his relief when she offered to float the bundle the rest of the way back to the Jedi academy for him.

STAR WARS: Anakin's Quest

Other than those two minor accidents, everything went smoothly. At last ArtooDetoo gave a satisfied whistle.

"You mean we're done?" Anakin asked. ArtooDetoo beeped once for yes.

"But there's still one crate left in the cargo hold," Tahiri pointed out. She tugged at a loose strand of her blond hair and gave Artoo an odd look.

"Isn't it on the list old Peckhum gave you?"

Artoo beeped twice. No.

Anakin's ice blue eyes met Tahiri's.

"I've got a strange feeling about this," he said. The three of them trooped back up the ramp into the cargo hold, and there, sure enough, was one large crate. Anakin closed his eyes for a moment.

"Whatever it is, it's not a machine."

Tahiri closed her eyes too and reached out with the Force.

"No, it's not!" Her green eyes flew open and went wide with surprise. "Do you think we should wait for old Peckhum?"

But Anakin was already unfastening the clasps on the cargo box.

"Give me a hand with this, would you, Artoo?" Anakin said.

Artoo reached out out a clamp and helped push up on the lid. Tahiri moved closer to peer inside-and then jumped back in surprise as something sprang out of the box.

Chapter Four

Anakin's mouth fell open. ArtooDetoo gave a trill of alarm. For once, Tahiri was silent. Anakin could hardly believe his eyes. A boy had just jumped out of the shipping crate. Anakin guessed the stowaway was in his early teens, but he had a sturdy build and was already a full head taller than Anakin. Shaggy chestnut hair fell to the boy's shoulders. Large amber eyes with a fringe of dark lashes stared back at Anakin from a proud face.

Anakin opened his mouth to say something but was too stunned to find the right words. As usual, Tahiri saved him the trouble.

"Hi, what's your name? What planet are you from? I'm Tahiri, and this is my friend Anakin. What are you doing here? Do you always travel in a box?"

"I am Uldir." The boy's voice squeaked when he spoke, as if it couldn't decide whether it was high or low. "I have decided to be a Jedi. Take me to Luke Skywalker."

Anakin frowned.

"It doesn't really work like that. I mean, I don't think anyone just *decides* to become a Jedi. But I'll take you to him."

"And if you really plan to become a Jedi," Tahiri added, "you'd better start calling Luke `Master Skywalker.'"

STAR WARS: Anakin's Quest

The shadowy hangar bay beneath the Great Temple was lit by colored flashes from the lightsaber lesson Luke Skywalker was teaching. The glowing swords were powerful Jedi weapons. Anakin hated to barge in on one of his uncle's lessons, but he didn't know what else to do. Uldir had insisted on seeing him right away.

"Excuse me, Master Skywalker," Anakin said, entering the large, echoing chamber. Anakin always used his uncle's formal title when Luke was teaching. The Jedi Master turned off his lightsaber and looked at Anakin. Luke's tall, violet-feathered student stepped back to wait, still holding her own glowing blade.

"I've brought someone who wants to meet you," Anakin said, indicating Uldir. "He came in on the *Lightning Rod* with old Peckhum."

Surprise showed on Luke Skywalker's face.

"He's a stowaway," Tahiri supplied helpfully. "His name is Uldir and he wants to be a Jedi."

Luke's eyebrows went up. If anything, he looked even more surprised than before.

"Hello, Uldir," Luke said in a soft, serious voice. "It's not an easy thing to become a Jedi. But if you think you can do it, I'll test you later. I need to finish this lesson first, though. I'm sure you're tired and hungry after your journey. Anakin and Tahiri, please show our guest around. After he's had a chance to clean himself up a bit in one of the rooms, make sure he gets something to eat, and then bring him to my office."

"Can we take ArtooDetoo with us?" Anakin asked. Luke turned on his lightsaber again.

"Sure," he said. "I think I can spare him for a little while longer."

Tahiri loved to talk. One reason Anakin made such a good friend for her, she thought, was that he liked to listen more than he liked to talk-and that was just fine with Tahiri. She told Uldir all about the Jedi academy. Now and then, Anakin added a few

Rebecca Moesta

words, but Tahiri did most of the talking. As they took Uldir on his first tour through the Great Temple, ArtooDetoo trundled along behind them.

"This is the turbolift," Tahiri said as the lift doors opened. "We'll take the turbolift to the top level to the Grand Audience Chamber and see that first."

Uldir snorted.

"I *know* what a turbolift is. I'm from Coruscant, and every building there has at least one."

Tahiri noticed that Anakin looked very interested in this piece of news. Even though she was stunned by Uldir's rudeness, Tahiri guessed she ought to try to find out more about him. The doors swished shut behind them and the lift zoomed upward.

"I was raised on Tatooine. We don't have many turbolifts there," Tahiri said. "Did you grow up on Coruscant?"

Uldir nodded.

"Coruscant and Corellia and a lot of other places—just about anywhere that had a New Republic military base. I've even been to Tatooine. My parents were pilots for the New Republic fleet," he said. "Mostly flying supply shuttles like that old clunker I came in on."

The turbolift doors opened and they all stepped out into a huge room with a high ceiling and tan stone walls worn smooth by time. The auditorium was full of stone benches and had a raised platform like a stage at one end.

"Are your parents dead, then?" Anakin asked in a low voice.

Uldir flinched.

"No, but they might as well be." His voice was full of anger and cracked as he spoke. "I hardly ever see them. They never stay on one planet for more than a few days at a time."

ArtooDetoo gave a sad-sounding warble that echoed through the huge chamber.

Tahiri said, "My parents were killed when I was three. I never really knew them. I was raised by Sand People on Tatooine. They

STAR WARS: Anakin's Quest

wanted me to stay with them, but Tionne found me and now I'm training to be a Jedi. Did you learn to pilot a ship?"

"Yes," Uldir said. "My parents want me to be a shuttle pilot just like them-the most boring job in the galaxy! But I want a job with adventure and excitement. That's why I've decided to become a Jedi."

As the tour went on, Tahiri got Uldir to talk more and more. She and Uldir talked about life on Tatooine. Anakin and Uldir discussed life on Coruscant, the capital world of the New Republic. All three talked about droids and which ones were their favorites. Because Uldir had trained to be a pilot, he liked R2 units, and ArtooDetoo seemed to approve of that. By the time Tahiri and Anakin showed Uldir to his room, all of them were friends, and all of them were hungry.

Chapter Five

Tahiri giggled at Anakin's expression of surprise. They were at midday meal in the main dining hall at the Jedi academy, and Anakin was watching Uldir eat with absolute astonishment. Even Tahiri had to admit that she'd never seen any humanoid-even a teenager-gulp down so much food in so little time. A cacophony of sounds filled the dining hall. Plates and cups clattered. Students talked, sang, woofed, trilled, and croaked. Liquid sloshed in pitchers.

The air smelled of baking pastry, fresh fruit, savory vegetables, and roasted meat. Tahiri was enjoying herself immensely. She and Anakin had long since finished their own meals, but she could still sense strong hunger and thirst in Uldir, as clearly as if he were talking to her through a comm speaker. Anakin must have sensed it too, because he offered a basket of fresh-baked bread to the stowaway, who was on his third helping of stew.

The teen ripped off a chunk of the bread, dunked it in his stew, and took a huge bite. Uldir's words of thanks, spoken around the large mouthful of food, came out sounding something like "fank oo." Tahiri could remember very well what it was like to be hungry and thirsty. She had lived for nine years on the desert planet Tatooine, where it had seemed there was never quite enough to eat and especially not enough to drink. But

on Yavin 4 there was always enough. That was one of the things she loved about the academy.

Tahiri picked up a wooden pitcher and refilled Uldir's mug with juice. She chuckled when a split second later he grabbed for the mug and drank it dry with noisy enthusiasm.

"Maybe you ought to slow down a bit," Anakin suggested with a look of concern.

"Maybe he's right," Tahiri said. "There's always plenty of good food here." She pointed to a stone ledge near the wall where a birdlike alien was sharing a meal with a Jedi trainee who looked vaguely like a short lizard that stood on two legs. "As you can see, we get trainees here from every part of the galaxy, and the cooks make sure that everyone has the kind of food they need. So why don't you stop eating for now and save some room for evening meal—it's only a few hours away. Besides," Tahiri went on, "it's almost time for us to take you to Master Skywalker. Don't you feel nervous about being tested? Aren't you going to say anything?"

Uldir shook back his shaggy chestnut hair.

"I'm not really worried. I've taken my share of tests. Anyway, I'm going to be a Jedi. No test can change that." Uldir filled his mug again, drank some more juice, and shot a grin at Anakin. "Does Tahiri always talk this much?"

"No," Anakin said after thinking about it for a moment. "She usually talks a lot more."

Uldir broke into surprised laughter. Tahiri did her best to look insulted, but failed miserably and finally burst into giggles herself. Anakin smiled too, but when he spoke his voice was serious.

"You know, Uldir, becoming a Jedi isn't as easy as you might think."

Uldir shrugged his broad shoulders.

"I'm not afraid of hard work."

Tahiri could see the worried look in Anakin's eyes that meant he was thinking about the dark side again.

Rebecca Moesta

"Sometimes I'm not even so sure I should be a Jedi," Anakin admitted, and this seemed to surprise Uldir. "Just *wanting* to become a Jedi can be so... dangerous."

"Dangerous-is that all?" Uldir's face cleared. "Don't forget, both of my parents are pilots. They started training me to fly almost before I could walk, so I'm used to danger." He stood up. "Take me to Master Skywalker. I'm ready for anything."

"Okay," Tahiri said with a smile. She pointed to his upper lip. "But I'd get rid of that juice mustache first."

.....

"We'll wait out here in the corridor," Tahiri said. She and Anakin and Uldir were standing at the doorway to Master Skywalker's study.

"Why?" Uldir said. "Come on in with me. This shouldn't take long."

"Um, are you sure you want us watching?" Anakin asked.

"Won't bother me a bit," Uldir said. His voice changed with a squeak in mid-sentence. He cleared his throat. "Besides, it's always good to have a friendly face around. For moral support, you know?"

"All right, if you're sure you don't mind," Tahiri said.

"Nah." Uldir turned and raised his fist to knock on the arched wooden door. But before he could, it was opened by Master Skywalker. He wore a plain brown robe with his lightsaber clipped to the belt.

"Come in," Luke Skywalker said. If he was surprised that Tahiri and Anakin entered with Uldir, he gave no sign.

Tahiri and Anakin sat against the stone wall on a bench near the door. They wanted to stay as much out of the way as possible so they wouldn't disturb Uldir's concentration for this important test. ArtooDetoo trundled over to join the two junior Jedi trainees. Tahiri noticed that Bait sat on the windowsill, watching silently. His gaze met hers for a long moment. In his blue-green eyes she saw a deep, ancient intelligence-and great curiosity.

STAR WARS: Anakin's Quest

Master Skywalker stood facing Uldir, about two meters away.

"So you would like to become a Jedi," Luke Skywalker said.

Uldir looked confident.

"Yes, I'm going to be a Jedi."

"Why?" the Jedi Master asked. His voice was almost a whisper.

Uldir's cheeks turned pink and he spread his hands.

"I, well, because..." He took a deep breath and started again.

"Jedi Knights have an important job. Everyone admires them. They uphold justice. They travel through the galaxy and defend the New Republic against all enemies." His amber eyes sparkled with enthusiasm. "And if they're forced to fight, they use their lightsabers and they call upon the powers of the Force and--"

Luke Skywalker held up one hand as if to say that Uldir had explained enough. With a faint smile he asked,

"If being a Jedi is that glamorous, why shouldn't everyone become one?"

Uldir put his hands on his hips.

"They don't have what it takes," he said. "No guts, I guess. No guts, no glory."

"And you have what it takes?" Luke Skywalker asked.

The sturdy teen threw back his shaggy chestnut hair and squared his shoulders.

"Yes, I do."

Luke Skywalker closed his eyes and drew in a calming breath. When he opened his eyes, he spoke in a low voice. Tahiri had often heard the words before.

"The Force is an energy that flows from and through all things, binds them together. We can draw an energy from the Force. The more we learn about it, the more we can draw from it. Some living creatures have a great potential for using the Force, others have very little. But even those who have that potential become Jedi only through the proper training and great sacrifice. Will you let me look into your mind to see how strong the Force is there?"

Rebecca Moesta

Uldir spread his arms.

“Sure, why not? That’s what I came for.”

Then he dropped his hands to his sides and waited.

Master Skywalker moved closer to Uldir. He held one hand palm out toward the teen’s forehead and closed his eyes. His brows drew together in concentration. Tahiri didn’t know how long the Jedi Master stood still like that. She lost track of time completely. She closed her eyes and could feel the Jedi Master’s mind reaching out, searching, probing.

“Well?” Uldir finally said in a voice that cracked with impatience.

Tahiri opened her eyes to find Luke Skywalker looking sadly into Uldir’s face. On the windowsill, Ikrit’s front paws were folded against his chest, and his ears and tail drooped.

“The Force is with you,” Luke Skywalker said to Uldir, “as it is in all living things.” He shook his head slowly. “But I did not find the Force strongly in your mind. There was no answering push against the Force in me. Even our weakest Jedi trainees have that answering strength in their minds.” Luke shook his head. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I don’t see in you the potential to become a Jedi.”

Uldir’s face flushed bright red. He clenched and unclenched his hands at his sides.

“I *will* become a Jedi,” he said.

Luke’s face clouded and he glanced for a moment toward Ikrit. Tahiri wondered if he was looking to the other Jedi Master for advice on this unusual situation. “It’s possible,” Luke admitted. “I’ve never heard of it happening, though. And there’s no way the Jedi academy can let in everyone who wants to study just on the chance that they *might* become a Jedi. You have so much to learn about the Force.”

“Then I’ll learn,” Uldir said. He gritted his teeth and his eyes narrowed with determination. “Give me a chance.”

“What about your parents?” Luke asked. “Would they be willing for you to stay here?”

STAR WARS: Anakin's Quest

"My parents are dead," Uldir said quickly.

Luke fixed him with a stern look and frowned ever so slightly.

"If you want to stay at the Jedi academy, don't ever lie to me," he said in a soft voice.

Uldir's shoulders slumped for the first time. "My parents don't know I'm here," he said. "I don't think they even care."

Luke didn't react. In fact, to Tahiri's surprise, he seemed to relent.

"We'll have to find out," Luke said. "All right, Uldir. If your parents agree, I'll let you study for a while at the Jedi academy. But everyone here has a job to do. We all have assignments: teaching, taking classes, unloading cargo, cooking. If you're willing to put in an honest day's work, you may stay at the academy and attend lectures and classes and learn about the Force. If by the end of three months you have learned enough about the Force to lift a pebble or light a flame, then I will accept you as a full-time student-if you still want to be one."

"I will want to-and then I'll become a Jedi. You'll see," Uldir said.

"First we must make sure your parents don't object," Luke answered. "Come with me."

In the Jedi academy's communications center, Tahiri watched Uldir shift nervously from foot to foot. He stood beside Luke Skywalker in front of the large viewscreen, waiting for the transmission from his parents to come through. Before long, the screen lit with the images of two worried faces. Tahiri admired the way Master Sky-walker answered the frantic questions of Uldir's parents, letting them know that their son was all right.

Once he had explained where Uldir was and that he was unharmed, Luke Skywalker said, "Your son has a question to ask you," and stepped aside. Uldir's jaw had a stubborn set to it, and he didn't look up directly at his parents' eyes.

"Luke, um, Master Skywalker is going to let me work and study here at the Jedi academy," Uldir mumbled. "But he says I

Rebecca Moesta

need *your* permission first,” he ended grumpily. His father blew out a puff of breath and looked relieved. His mother’s face lit with delight.

“You mean that Master Skywalker will really let you stay?” she asked. “That’s fine with me,” his father said gruffly. “We were afraid you’d gone off and joined some pirates,” he admitted.

His kind amber eyes searched for Luke Skywalker, who stepped back on screen.

“I hope you know how to handle him better than we do, Master Skywalker. He’s a wild one.”

Uldir’s mother clasped her hands below her chin, as if pleading with Luke.

“He’s a good boy, really. He just isn’t much interested in our work, and we’re not sure what to do with him. He always seems to want something more, something different. Do you think you can help him?”

Luke Skywalker put a hand on Uldir’s shoulder.

“That will be mostly up to your son.”

Uldir’s mother said, “Thank you, Master Skywalker.”

His father added, “And may the Force be with you.”

Chapter Six

Anakin Solo stood on top of the Great Temple, panting from his climb up the outer stairway. The late-afternoon breeze dried the sweat that trickled down his forehead. From this high above the ground there was a wonderful view of the surrounding jungle and the river not far away. But Anakin had not come for the view. He had come to be alone. To think-or maybe to brood. There was no railing around the platform on top of the pyramid, but Anakin was not afraid of falling.

He knew how to use his Jedi powers to keep his balance. He sat at the edge of the stone platform and removed his shoes, in the hope that going barefoot would give him at least a little of the positive bubbiness that Tahiri always seemed to have. He waited a minute to see if he would feel any different....

Well, at least his feet felt better. Far below, Anakin saw tiny figures walking out onto the landing field. It was his uncle and a few of the advanced students at the Jedi academy. Anakin couldn't help watching with interest as a lightsaber flared brightly in Luke's hands. One by one each of the students also turned on their lightsabers.

Lightsabers.

In his dream Darth Vader had tried to give Anakin a lightsaber. He shuddered. The dreams... *that* was what he had

Rebecca Moesta

come here to think about. On the landing pad the Jedi Master and his students began drilling with their lightsabers. Anakin could hear distant sizzles each time a pair of the energy blades clashed together.

"This I cannot teach you." Anakin jumped. "Ikrit, you scared me."

"Mmmmm." Ikrit's voice was somewhere between a purr and a growl. "My approach was not quiet, but your mind was on other things."

Anakin looked down at the furry white creature who now sat beside him. He felt silly.

"I guess I should have noticed you. I mean, normally I would have. It's just that I'm not really *myself* right now."

There was a long pause. Finally Ikrit asked, "Who are you, then?"

Anakin could sense that Ikrit wasn't making a joke. It was an honest question. Anakin searched in his mind for an honest answer. He sighed.

"That's just it: I don't know. I always thought I did. I mean, I'm a kid whose father just happens to be one of the hottest pilots in the galaxy, whose mother is the leader of the New Republic, whose twin brother and sister just happen to have more Jedi potential than anyone else at the academy under the age of sixteen, and whose uncle also happens to be the most powerful Jedi Master alive." Anakin grinned at his own words. "You know-I'm just an average kid."

Below, lightsabers continued to hum and buzz, drawing bright arcs in the air.

"And now?" the furry Jedi Master prompted.

Anakin groaned.

"Now I'm beginning to wonder. I've been having dreams about the dark side. I want to become a good Jedi and use the powers of the light side, but in my dreams, the Emperor and Darth Vader have claimed me for the dark side. What if it's true? What if I can't escape it?"

STAR WARS: Anakin's Quest

Ikrit's voice was thoughtful.

"*What if* is a question we all must face. How do you propose to answer it?"

"I think if I could only go to Dagobah-" Anakin began.

"Dagobah?" Ikrit interrupted. "That is a small planet, and far away. Why go there?"

"Because that's where Yoda trained Uncle Luke, and he gave him a test, and-"

Ikrit's floppy ears perked up and he looked more interested than ever.

"Please tell me," he said, "about Luke and Yoda and Dagobah and the test..."

Planetshine from the orange gas giant of Yavin streamed in through the narrow window slit of Master Luke Skywalker's chambers at the Jedi academy. The night air was still warm and Luke had pulled aside the heavy curtains to let in the soft breeze and the spicy scent of jungle flowers. Although he had been lying down for at least an hour, sleep would not come. He relaxed and let himself enjoy the beauty of the soft light. Somehow, when the furry white form of Jedi Master Ikrit appeared on his windowsill, Luke was not surprised.

"Welcome," Luke said, sitting up slowly and motioning for Ikrit to come in. "What brings you here tonight?"

"Concern for the boy," Ikrit said.

Luke nodded. He knew that in some strange way the alien Jedi Master felt drawn to watch over and protect Anakin.

"He seems to think," Ikrit went on, "that only a journey to Dagobah can show him what he truly is inside."

"I sometimes wonder," Luke said softly, "if Leia was wrong to name Anakin after his grandfather, a Jedi who fell to the dark side."

"In the end," Ikrit pointed out, "you turned him back to the light side."

"In the *end*...", Luke agreed.

Rebecca Moesta

"The boy is strong in the Force," Ikrit said. "Stronger perhaps than he knows."

Luke nodded.

"And when he's with his friend Tahiri, he's even stronger."

"A strong Jedi will he be," Ikrit said, "with the chance to do great good, or-as the boy fears-great evil. The boy will not feel free to finish his Jedi training until he has made this journey and looked inside himself."

Luke realized that the alien Jedi Master was right.

"Anakin needs more time and training than I have to give him," Luke admitted. "When Yoda taught me, he had no other students, but I have so many to train it could be months before I can break free to take Anakin to Dagobah."

Luke thought for a moment.

"I might be able to send Tionne with him. She could leave sooner than I could." He sighed. "But I'm not certain she can help Anakin face this test. She's a wise Jedi, but she has never come face-to-face with the dark side in the same way I have... and as Anakin has."

"I will take the boy to Dagobah myself, if you will permit it," Ikrit said.

Luke looked at the white-furred Jedi in surprise. Why hadn't the thought occurred to him? Luke knew so little about this alien Jedi Master. He could sense the goodness in Ikrit and that Ikrit would do anything to protect Anakin. Luke chuckled as a thought struck him.

"I don't think Tahiri will agree to let Anakin out of her sight." Ikrit made an odd wheezing sound and Luke guessed that this was the Jedi's way of laughing.

"No, you are right," Ikrit said. "I will take the girl as well."

Luke wondered if this could be the solution he had been looking for after all. Anakin needed time and attention from a Jedi Master, and here was a Jedi Master offering just that. Luke began to think practically.

"How would you get to Dagobah? Can you pilot a ship?"

STAR WARS: Anakin's Quest

Ikrit's large fluffy ears drooped in the moonlight.

"I have been a pilot, yes. But I was asleep for hundreds of years before the children wakened me. I am not familiar with your newer ships." The ears pricked up again. "The supply shuttle is still here - would the pilot take us to Dagobah?"

Luke was doubtful.

"Old Peckhum fly you in the *Lightning Rod*? It's a pretty long hyperspace jump to Dagobah. I'm not sure his ship could make it."

"The boy claims that the ship is much more sound than it looks," Ikrit replied. "After all, one should not judge a ship based solely on the looks of its hull, just as one cannot judge a Jedi by his appearance." Ikrit swept a paw down his furry form to indicate that he was an unlikely-looking Jedi Master.

"Size matters not," he added.

This brought a surprised laugh from Luke.

"That's what my old Jedi Master used to say."

Somehow hearing Yoda's words from the mouth of the tiny white-furred Jedi helped Luke to make his decision.

"All right," he said, "I'll talk to old Peckhum about taking you to Dagobah in his shuttle. I'd feel more comfortable if you had a backup mechanic in the *Lightning Rod*, though. You should only be gone for a week or two at the most, so I'll send ArtooDetoo with you. If you run into any emergencies he can help Peckhum make repairs."

Ikrit gave a satisfied-sounding grunt.

"It is agreed, then."

"I still have to persuade Peckhum to take you," Luke warned.

"If it will help," Ikrit said, "you may explain to him that I am a Jedi Master. I will watch over the children."

"I think that will help," Luke agreed. "After that, there are only two people left to convince."

"Tahiri will agree," Ikrit said. "And Tionne will not object."

"True," Luke said. "But the two people I was thinking of are Anakin's parents, Han and Leia."

Rebecca Moesta

Anakin stood with Tahiri and ArtooDetoo in front of the large screen in the Jedi academy's communications center. On the screen, his mother's face registered alarm.

"Old Peckhum is taking you to Dagobah in the *Lightning Rod*?" Leia Organa Solo asked. The image of Han Solo put an arm around his wife.

"Hey, the *Lightning Rod* may look like a hunk of junk," he said, "but I just helped old Peckhum and his friend Zekk install a new hyperdrive motivator last week. Mechanically, the ship's in pretty good shape."

"And Master Skywalker is sending ArtooDetoo with us just in case there are any problems," Tahiri piped up. The little droid warbled and bleeped encouragingly.

Leia looked slightly relieved-but only slightly. She bit her lower lip, her face creased with motherly concern.

"Are you sure this will help you get past all of those things that have been bothering you? And are you certain this... this quest of yours is the only way?"

"I'm sure," Anakin said. "But I won't stay a minute longer than I have to."

On screen, Han and Leia exchanged a look.

"Then you have our permission, kid," Han said.

Anakin could tell that it was hard for his parents to let him go on this trip.

"Thanks for understanding, Mom and Dad," Anakin said.

His father forced a lopsided grin onto his face.

"Dagobah's a strange planet, you know-you kids keep a close eye on each other."

"We will," Tahiri agreed. "And trust the Force," Leia added.

Chapter Seven

Stars, millions of them, stretched into starlines around the *Lightning Rod* as it jumped into hyperspace. Anakin finally let himself begin to relax. They were really under way. They were really going to Dagobah. One way or another, he would soon face his worst fears and find the answer to the question that had been burning in his mind: was he truly doomed to fall to the dark side as his grandfather had, or was there hope that he could rise above the darkness, as Luke had?

Tahiri sat next to Anakin in the cramped cockpit of the *Lightning Rod*. There were only two passenger seats, so Ikrit rode on Anakin's shoulder. Peckhum had rigged a tiny harness of crash webbing for Ikrit that attached to the headrest of Anakin's seat. From this perch, Ikrit could see the front viewport over the head of old Peckhum, who sat in, the pilot's seat. Tahiri sat behind ArtooDetoo, who was clamped down at the copilot's station.

Peckhum had removed the copilot's seat to make room for the little barrel-shaped droid. Tahiri, always the optimist, yanked at a strand of her pale yellow hair and grinned at Anakin.

"This is really kind of cozy, isn't it?" she said. "It's a shame we couldn't bring Uldir along. He looked kind of unhappy when we

Rebecca Moesta

told him we had to go away for a few days. Do you think he'll be all right?"

"He did seem upset at first," Anakin agreed, "but when I got back from packing my bags, he was almost cheerful."

"Well, that's good," Tahiri said, smiling. "He's probably looking forward to the chance to settle in to his new work at the Jedi academy while we're gone."

"He has a lot to get used to," Anakin said. "It'll probably take him some time."

From his place at the copilot's station, ArtooDetoo beeped once.

"Well, I can tell you," Peckhum said, "it's not always so easy to adjust to changes. It's still hard for me to believe that that furry little pet on your shoulder is really a Jedi."

"A Jedi Master," Anakin corrected.

"If you say so," old Peckhum replied.

The longhaired pilot flicked a few switches and double - checked his readouts.

"Looks like we're right on course," he said, "so we've got plenty of time to just sit back and get acquainted. What did you say that critter's name was again?"

ArtooDetoo made a rude-sounding noise, as if scolding Peckhum.

"My name is Ikrit," Ikrit said. "You may talk directly to me now that you know who and what I am."

Old Peckhum glanced back at the furry creature in surprise. It was the first time he had ever heard Ikrit talk.

"I guess I'm so used to thinkin' about you as Anakin's pet, I'm not used to thinkin' about you as a person, Master Ikrit."

"Ikrit," the Jedi said. "Just Ikrit will be fine."

Anakin couldn't help smiling. It was pretty funny to watch someone trying to grasp for the first time that Ikrit was a Jedi Master.

"If you'll pardon my sayin' so, Master, uh, er, Ikrit," old Peckhum said, "you just don't look much like a Jedi Master."

Ikrit did not seem offended.

"And what does a Jedi Master look like?" he asked.

"Well, um... *bigger*, I guess, for starters."

Anakin grinned.

"Tahiri and I aren't very big."

"No," Peckhum admitted, "but you're just trainees, and you'll get bigger as you get older. From what I've heard, little Ikrit there is already hundreds of years old."

"This is true," Ikrit said. "Never will I be larger than I am now, and never will my body be stronger than it is now. Many of my people once thought as you do, that I could not become a Jedi Master. Let me tell you a story."

Ikrit rose up on his hind legs and held his paws out before him as if he were drawing pictures in the air with his arms.

"I come from a planet called Kushibah in the Outer Rim. My people, the Kushibans, are a simple folk, and my size is normal for our kind. "The Kushibans from my village are farmers and weavers. They grow silkweed and combine it with the fur we brush from our coats each day and spin it into thread. With the thread we weave cloth and tapestries in every color you can imagine. Our weaving is famous throughout the galaxy."

Peckhum nodded.

"Sure. I've seen some of it."

"As a farmer and weaver, weaver, my skills were unremarkable," Ikrit went on. "However, when I was still quite young for my kind-a little older than Anakin and Tahiri are now-a Jedi Master came to our planet and visited our village. My people were surprised by his visit, for he was seeking a student to train. I was honored that a Jedi Master should come to our village to search for a student, so I offered to assist him in any way he needed while he stayed on Kushibah. I did not dare present myself to him for testing, but to my surprise, he told me that I was the student he had been searching for-just like that!

"I laughed out loud, and so did the people of my village when they heard. 'That's a good idea, Ikrit,' they said. 'Become a Jedi

Rebecca Moesta

Master. You could always build a lightsaber and use it to help us with the silkweed harvest.' In spite of their joking, I went away with the Master and began training to become a Jedi.

"I had been training only about a year and was still unsure of myself when I went back to visit my family. The people of my village were happy that I came, though they still teased me. The night before the silkweed harvest was to begin, one of our villagers returned from the fields torn and bleeding. She told us that a herd of vicious xinkra-beasts three meters tall who could eat one of my people in a single gulp-were headed down the mountain slopes toward the silkweed fields and the village. One of the monsters had seen her and surged ahead, hoping for a quick meal, but she had outwitted the beast, dazzling its eyes with her harvesting knife so that when it sprang at her it bit down on the sharp blade first instead of her arm. And so she had escaped to warn the rest of the village.

"The Kushibans scrambled through their houses searching for anything to use as weapons. They brought rakes, scythes, hoes, even spindles or bits of cloth, but I knew my people were pitifully armed. They would not be able to defend themselves against the beasts. A few of them brought torches, for fire was the only thing that xinkra truly feared. I knew that if the villagers fought that day many would die.

"I climbed onto a grassy rooftop in the center of the village and spoke to my people. I asked them to trust me, to let me fight the xinkra alone before they attacked the beasts with their weak weapons. And then, without waiting for a reply, I rushed out to the fields to meet the beasts. My people must have trusted me, at least a little, for they waited to see what I would do.

"As the beasts thundered closer, I climbed onto a stack of harvested silkweed. I knew I did not have the strength to fight the xinkra with my hands. A hundred or more of them stampeded toward me, snapping at the air with their sharp fangs and slashing it with their long claws. I knew then that I only needed to change the xinkra's minds, so I sent them a picture

STAR WARS: Anakin's Quest

with my mind. I sent them a picture of the village ahead in flames, red and orange and yellow tongues of fire licking toward the sky. And I sent the picture of food-far away behind them in the forests and streams of the mountains. *Plenty* of food: flying creatures, rodents, reptiles, and fish.

"Within seconds, the xinkra turned and headed back toward their home.

"When I returned to my village, my people greeted me as a hero, for they too had a new picture in their minds. I knew then that I would return to my Jedi Master and become a Jedi Knight, so that I could help to defend the galaxy against the darkness that was rising up to devour it."

"I hope," Anakin said, "that when I leave Dagobah I'll be as sure about being a Jedi as you were when you left Kushibah."

"Well now, little Ikrit, I'm glad you told us that story," old Peckhum chimed in. "Even if you're not very big, seems like you're a mighty fine person to have around when there's trouble."

Uldir huddled in the hold of the *Lightning Rod*, wondering how long it would be until they reached Dagobah. He knew that there was something special about where they were going, that Anakin and Tahiri would be learning something important about becoming Jedi. Well, he had decided, if it was important for them, it was important for him, too-no matter what Master Skywalker thought. Uldir figured it was easier to apologize afterward than to get permission to go along.

Besides, he knew he had to take his chances wherever he saw them. Uldir *did* have what it took to become a Jedi, he was sure. He just needed the right opportunity, the right equipment. And he had to learn the right tricks. He needed to have all the same chances that other Jedi students had, like Anakin and Tahiri. He wondered what his friends were doing up in the cockpit of the *Lightning Rod*, but he couldn't afford to show himself just yet. No,

Rebecca Moesta

there was still a chance that old Peckhum would turn the ship around if he knew that Uldir was on board.

Uldir smiled as he imagined the surprise on Anakin and Tahiri's faces when he finally showed himself. But for now he would have to bide his time. He was going to be a Jedi. And Jedi had to learn patience.

Chapter Eight

Tahiri observed the small milky white planet that hung in the front viewport. She looked at Anakin and shrugged.

"Looks harmless enough."

"Well, I'm reading millions of life-forms," old Peckhum said, "but no cities, no landing beacons-in fact, no technology at all."

"Sounds like the right world, then," Anakin said.

"Yes...", Ikrit breathed, as if talking to himself. "That would be the right one."

"Are you sure you know how to get us close to the right spot, Artoo?" Anakin asked.

ArtooDetoo swiveled his domed head around and bleeped once for "yes."

"How does he know where to go?" Tahiri asked, suddenly curious.

"Oh, didn't I tell you?" Anakin said. "Artoo's been here before with Uncle Luke."

"Speaking of your uncle," Peckhum said, "he told me that it might be a bit tricky navigating through the atmosphere and that having ArtooDetoo along would help. I sure hope he's right-about the droid, I mean. Here we go."

With that, the old spacer nudged the nose of the *Lightning Rod* downward so that it pointed straight toward Dagobah. Before

Rebecca Moesta

long the ship was surrounded by white mist. Tahiri could see nothing but white through the viewports, no matter which direction she looked. The ship bounced and shuddered a few times on air currents as the atmosphere got thicker.

“Well, this isn’t really so bad,” Peckhum said, but Tahiri got a funny feeling at the back of her neck when he said it. A feeling that something wasn’t quite right. Just then the ship shuddered and jolted and old Peckhum groaned.

“All the scopes are dead; I can’t get any readings. Look’s like we’re pickin’ up speed, though.” ArtooDetoo blooped and twittered in alarm.

Tahiri watched as the white mists in the viewports became, if anything, even whiter, and harder to see through. ArtooDetoo tweeted a suggestion. Peckhum looked down at the screen that translated the little droid’s words for him.

“All right then,” the pilot answered, “if you think you can find a good landing spot from here, you go right ahead. I can’t see a thing.”

Artoo buzzed once in acknowledgment. The *Lightning Rod* hurtled downward through the atmosphere. Tahiri felt her stomach muscles tighten and she gritted her teeth and balled her hands into fists.

From her perch on Anakin’s shoulder, Ikrit reached out a forepaw to touch her arm.

“It’ll be fine,” Anakin said. “I’ve just got a feeling about this.”

ArtooDetoo whirled and bleeped several times.

“He says we’re almost there,” Peckhum translated.

Tahiri tried to keep her voice steady.

“Good-the sooner the better.”

Suddenly the *Lightning Rod* broke through the cover of heavy clouds into the grayish-blue air over the swamps of Dagobah. Less than a minute later ArtooDetoo brought the ship in for a landing in a wide marshy area surrounded by incredibly tall trees. The ship slid as it came to a stop, teetered for a moment, and then tilted sideways into the muddy water.

STAR WARS: Anakin's Quest

"I *thought* you said you knew the best area to land," the old spacer grumbled.

ArtooDetoo swiveled his head and gave a few sharp bleeps. Old Peckhum groaned again and shook his head.

"What did he say?" Tahiri asked.

Peckhum looked at the monitor screen.

"He said," the pilot explained, "that this *is* the best place to land."

"Well, we made it," Anakin said. "We're actually here."

There was a tingling feeling-in the pit of his stomach now that he was so close to his goal. He wanted to find the cave and put an end to all his bad dreams. At least that's what he hoped would happen.

"Are you sure you don't want to come along, Peckhum?" Tahiri asked, tugging at a few strands of her wavy pale yellow hair.

"Nope," the old spacer said. "I'm gonna stay here and check out all the ship's systems and make sure everything's in good working condition. Nearly scared the boots off me when my sensors blinked out like that before we landed."

"Boots!" Anakin said. "That reminds me." He looked down at Tahiri's bare feet. "You might want to put something, um, er... *on* before we go out there."

He knew how much Tahiri hated wearing shoes, so he tried to say it carefully to avoid upsetting her. He could see right away that he had failed, though. The blond-haired girl planted both fists on her hips.

"Oh no you don't, Anakin Solo. You may be my best friend, but I'm *not* putting on shoes-not even for you."

Ikrit unbuckled his crash harness, scampered over to a storage locker, and removed a small knapsack. Anakin had no idea what the Jedi Master was up to. Ikrit tossed the pack to Tahiri, who caught it easily.

"The Jedi Tionne packed this for you," he explained.

Rebecca Moesta

Anakin watched Tahiri open the sack and rummage through its contents. There was a small medikit, a glowrod, some emergency food packets, and a pair of buttery-soft leather boots. Tahiri blushed, but Anakin couldn't tell if she was pleased or embarrassed.

Ikrit handed Anakin a similar small pack of provisions. Anakin slung the straps over his shoulders and said,

"All right then, let's get moving."

Tahiri shrugged and put her knapsack on as well.

"Might as well bring it with me," she grumbled. "But I won't promise to wear the boots."

"Sure," old Peckhum said, "you kids go ahead. I'll trust the Jedi Master and Artoo there to keep an eye on you while you get the lay of the..

. uh... swamp."

Ikrit scrambled up onto ArtooDetoo's domed head. The droid, who seemed not to mind, gave a confident whistle. Peckhum opened the exit hatch and lowered the ramp. Together, Anakin, Tahiri, Ikrit, and Artoo walked, rode, or rolled down the ramp. The air outside was warm and thick with moisture, but the first thing Anakin really noticed was the smell.

A heavy, boggy odor clogged the air: mildew mixed with the scent of blooming flowers and rotting plants and a thousand other smells Anakin couldn't name.

"Do you know which direction Yoda's training area was from here?" Anakin asked.

ArtooDetoo beeped once and led the way.

Anakin was a bit surprised that the little droid was able to maneuver so well on the marshy ground. Ikrit gave a thoughtful rumble deep in his throat.

"Mmmmm. There is much energy from the Force. Many creatures are here."

"I can sense them too," Tahiri agreed, waving a hand in front of her face, "but the only ones I can really see are these bugs."

STAR WARS: Anakin's Quest

She was right, Anakin noticed. There were insects everywhere-billions of them flying in swarms.

Tahiri coughed.

"I think-I think I just breathed one in."

She flapped her hand again, as if trying to wave away the clouds of insects.

"Stay calm, child," Ikrit said. "The Force is in all creatures, even ones so small. Calm your mind. Direct the creatures away from you with your thoughts."

Still following ArtooDetoo, Anakin let his eyes fall half shut and *thought* at the swarms of insects that buzzed and hummed about him. He imagined the creatures staying away from him, moving back a bit. To his surprise, although the insects did not go away, they came no closer than about ten centimeters-as if there were a tiny force field surrounding him.

"Hey, it works!" Tahiri said.

Anakin looked over at her and noticed that she had managed to repel the insects, too. He was less worried about the animals he *could* see than the animals he could not, however. Walking through the swamp was eerie. The misty air above let little sunlight through and covered the tops of the trees so that the day was never quite light and never quite dark. Shreds of mist clung to tree trunks and hovered above pools of brackish water. A stream of bubbles made a gurgling sound in one of the murky pools. Anakin wondered whether the bubbles came from a submerged spring or from some air-breathing creature that lurked beneath the surface.

Around them on every side, unseen swamp dwellers croaked, hissed, chirped, trilled, growled, and belched. Anakin felt a prickling at the back of his neck and shivered. He hoped it wasn't too far before they came to the cave. Ikrit seemed to think that it was time for a lesson, because he began to talk to Anakin and Tahiri.

"Since the Force is in all things," he said, "it can teach us much. If one can simply learn to listen to the Force--"

Rebecca Moesta

Just then a cry rang out behind them, a cry of pain and terror. It came from the direction of the *Lightning Rod*.

Chapter Nine

Tahiri and Anakin cried out at the same time.

“Peckhum!” Tahiri said.

“No!” Anakin yelled.

The two friends whirled and ran back toward the *Lightning Rod*. Ikrit sprang down from ArtooDetoo’s head and dashed after them. The barrel-shaped droid followed, whistling and beeping his distress. Tahiri’s loose blond hair streamed out behind her as she ran. Her bare feet thudded softly against the muddy ground. She was a fast runner, but Anakin kept up with her. She heard the voice calling for help again.

“Hang on,” Anakin yelled back, “we’re on our way.”

Tahiri felt her heart pounding in terror, but not for herself. She jumped over a rotten log and ducked under a curtain of moss that hung from a tree branch. A part of her mind was thinking how proud she was that Anakin had reacted so quickly to hurry to the aid of a friend. With her next step, Tahiri felt a sharp pain in her foot. She gasped, but there was no time to stop now, she decided. The *Lightning Rod* was just up ahead. She could see it.

Limping ever so slightly, she ran the last few steps into the clearing. She panted for breath as she looked around in dismay. There was no sign of the pilot.

Rebecca Moesta

“Peckhum, where are you?” Anakin called, running up beside her.

“Heeelp!” A faint voice drifted toward them from the far side of the *Lightning Rod*.

“This way,” Ikrit said, scrambling past them. The Jedi Master’s white fur was filthy and matted from running through the mud. Tahiri and Anakin followed him to the far side of the ship, where half of the *Lightning Rod* rested in a shallow pool of scummy water. Tahiri’s mouth gaped open with the shock of what she saw there.

“Uldir!”

Uldir nearly fainted with relief when he saw his friends Anakin and Tahiri round the side of the ship. He had been frozen with fright for what seemed like hours; but maybe it had only been minutes since he had opened a tiny escape hatch in the cargo bay of the *Lightning Rod* and climbed out-only to land in what looked to him like a sea of swamp slime. Of course, Uldir had realized instantly that he’d made a dreadful mistake by leaping down from the exit hatch without looking first, but it had been too late to correct his error.

He’d turned and tried to slosh toward solid ground, but lost his footing and plunged face-first into the muck. He’d panicked. Thrashing with his arms and legs, Uldir had managed to get his head back above the swampy water, only to find that his struggles had made him sink deeper into the ooze.

He was now up to his armpits in the stinking grayish-green water. To make matters worse (if that were possible), his splashing had attracted the attention of one of the ugliest and, well, *slimi*est creatures he had ever set eyes on.

Uldir froze. The thing, whatever it was, had a long sausage-shaped body-about ten meters long, Uldir guessed. Its melon-round head and its long body were covered with slick greenish-gray fur, the same color as the swamp water. The creature raised its bulbous head high into the air above Uldir, then tilted it from

STAR WARS: Anakin's Quest

side to side, trying to get a good look at him through its six milk white eyes.

Uldir, still frozen with fright, had hoped that the furry snake monster would decide that he was much too large to eat and simply go away. But no sooner had this hope crossed Uldir's mind than the animal bent over and pushed its round furry face close to Uldir's so that he could see its three enormous flat front teeth.

The teeth were nearly as long as Uldir was tall. Uldir tried to take a step backward, but his feet were fixed firmly in the mud. A long strand of algae was stuck between two of the creature's front teeth, and when it opened its mouth enough for him to smell its foul breath, Uldir couldn't help himself-he screamed.

The creature jerked its head back and blinked its six milky eyes at him. Uldir thought he heard an answering yell in the distance. The furry snake thing turned its head around almost in a full circle, as if searching for the source of the noise, then swiveled back toward Uldir again. Its melon head dipped down toward him and it opened its mouth again-and gave out a roaring, stinking belch.

Uldir screamed again and used the only weapon he could find. He threw handfuls of mushy algae directly at the monster's mouth. The creature coughed and gulped and made a loud rumbling sound deep in its throat, but it did not eat Uldir. So, for what seemed like an eternity, each time the massive head approached him, Uldir threw globs of slimy algae and yelled.

Finally Uldir heard a strange wheezing voice he didn't recognize, saying,

"Over here!" Then he saw Anakin and Tahiri rushing to help him. The sausage animal backed up again to get a look at the new arrivals. Uldir glanced around to locate the source of the strange voice but saw no one except Anakin, Tahiri, and Anakin's furry pet Ikrit. Tahiri called out Uldir's name in surprise.

"Help me get out of here before this monster eats me!" Uldir called back.

Rebecca Moesta

Tahiri, who seemed to be limping, looked puzzled.

“Can’t you swim over here?” she asked.

“No,” Uldir said.

The creature’s face approached again, and he slung another handful of algae at it.

“I’m stuck in the mud.”

Uldir noticed that Anakin’s pet had moved away from the water and figured that it must be afraid of the swamp, or of the slimy-furred sausage monster, or of both.

“Stay calm. We’re going to get you out,” Anakin said.

Tahiri took a step toward Uldir, but Anakin stopped her.

“It wouldn’t be a good idea for us to go out there even if you were a good swimmer.”

Tahiri looked sheepish.

“Oh-right. We could get stuck, too, and then we wouldn’t be any help to Uldir.”

“Anyway,” Anakin said, “I’m pretty sure that monster won’t hurt him. I think I’ve got an idea to get rid of it.”

“I will assist Anakin,” Uldir heard the strange wheezing voice say, but he couldn’t see who was speaking.

Tahiri stopped to think for a moment.

“Okay, I’ll get a stick or a rope or something to help pull him out,” she said.

“A really long branch ought to work, or maybe a vine. I could probably find a rope in the *Lightning Rod*. If not, I might be able to tie some cables together. I can be quite resourceful, you know.”

Uldir sighed. He wished the girl would do less talking and get around to rescuing him.

“Are you *sure* you can take care of the, um, wildlife?” Tahiri asked, looking over her shoulder.

Anakin nodded.

“I can handle it.” The blond-haired girl limped off to a stand of trees and Uldir saw Anakin shut his eyes and raise his hand toward the furry snake monster, almost as if he were greeting it.

STAR WARS: Anakin's Quest

The melon head swung around to look at Anakin, cocking this way and that to get a better view. Uldir wondered if the younger boy was using some sort of Jedi trick to control the animal's mind. Seeing that the beast was distracted, Uldir tried to wriggle free, but only sank deeper in the mud.

The smelly water came up to his chin now. With his eyes so close to the surface of the pool, Uldir saw something very strange happening. Blobs of floating algae were gathering together to form a larger blob. From across the gray-green pool, more lumps of algae floated toward the growing mass. Soon the algae formed a thick pulpy carpet on the surface of the water, nearly two meters wide. It floated slowly toward the furry snake beast.

"Can you reach out to the creature's mind and persuade it to go away?" Anakin asked.

Uldir looked toward him and could see that the boy must have been moving the algae with his mind, with the Force. He wondered who Anakin could be talking to—didn't he know Uldir couldn't use the Force like that?

The melon head bent toward the surface of the water and slurped up a huge mouthful of algae. The algae floated farther away from Uldir, and the beast followed, munching contentedly. While Anakin guided the slimy creature away, Tahiri returned with a length of tough vine. She threw one end to Uldir, but it fell short and began to drift out of reach. The girl shut her bright green eyes and concentrated. Uldir was amazed to see the vine begin to drift back toward him. Soon he was able to reach out and catch the end of it.

Uldir pulled, trying to free his feet from the mud. Tahiri leaned backward to pull, but he could see her face crumple in pain as she pushed down hard with both heels to keep from sliding into the water. Anakin and his furry pet quickly came to her aid, but even together they were unable to pull Uldir free. Uldir strained with his arms, pulling on the vine as hard as he could.

Rebecca Moesta

He kicked and wriggled in the warm, putrid water. Just as he was about to give up hope, the little R2 droid appeared again, followed by the longhaired pilot.

Old Peckhum looked just as surprised as Anakin and Tahiri had been to see Uldir. Without stopping to ask questions, though, the pilot wrapped his huge hands around the vine and tugged. Once Peckhum put his legs and back into it, adding his strength to the group's efforts, Uldir's feet pulled free. When his feet came out of the mud, Uldir's entire body skidded across the surface of the filthy water like a turbo-ski.

By the time Anakin, Tahiri, and old Peckhum hauled him up out of the pool, every square centimeter of Uldir's body was covered with swamp scum. Algae dangled from his hair and grayish-green water dripped from his ears and nose.

"Thank you," Uldir managed to splutter. He coughed up a whole mouthful of swamp water.

"What are you doing here, Uldir?" Tahiri asked. "How did you get to Dagobah, and why did you come? What were you doing in the swamp? What was that thing that was looking at you? Does Master Skywalker know you're here? How did-"

"Well, this day's just been full of surprises," Peckhum finally cut in. "But there'll be time enough for questions later. I think we'd better get a certain young man cleaned up."

The idea of being clean and dry suddenly sounded very good to Uldir.

"And"-the old spacer looked at Tahiri-"then I think we'd better take care of a certain stubborn young lady's foot."

ArtooDetoo gave a loud beep of agreement. Uldir looked down at Tahiri and saw that her right foot was bleeding. The blond girl blushed a bright red.

"Well, maybe I did learn a bit of a lesson about going barefoot on strange planets," she said. Her comment interested Uldir. Apparently these Jedi trainees weren't so powerful. If Tahiri knew so much about the Force, why hadn't she been able to protect her feet? Uldir was sure that with a little bit of training

STAR WARS: Anakin's Quest

even *he* could do better than that. Sure, he had had a close call himself just now, but that had been with a monster, not with a little thorn or a pebble.

"Thank you all for rescuing me," he said with real gratitude. "If you hadn't come along, that monster would have eaten me for sure."

"Mmmm. You were never in any true danger."

There was that strange wheezy voice he had heard earlier, Uldir thought. He looked around to see who had spoken. All he saw was Anakin's pet, Ikrit.

"Your danger came from the swamp itself, not from the creature," Ikrit said.

Uldir's eyes went wide. "It-it talked!"

Chapter Ten

In the hold of the *Lightning Rod*, Anakin sipped from a cup of warm broth that old Peckhum had made in the food prep unit. Beside him Uldir sat wrapped in blankets, drinking soup and shivering occasionally, even though it wasn't cold inside. ArtooDetoo pattered and fussed over the wound on Tahiri's foot, making scolding noises while the longhaired old pilot bandaged it.

"I'm sorry I didn't hear you calling for help sooner," Peckhum said. "I had the antistatic generator running while I checked the circuit paths. I couldn't hear a thing."

"You came right when we needed you," Anakin said.

"Well you can thank your furry little Jedi friend here for that," old Peckhum said, winking at Ikrit, who was once again perched on Artoo's domed head.

"Jedi?" Uldir exploded into laughter.

"Okay. I'll admit it's pretty amazing that your pet can talk. But don't try to tell me that *that* overgrown furball is a Jedi!" He pointed at Ikrit, whooping and chuckling until tears filled his amber eyes.

Anakin wasn't sure exactly how he had expected Uldir to react to learning about Ikrit. Surprise? Awe? Maybe even discomfort or distrust... but not this. Anakin found himself becoming annoyed.

STAR WARS: Anakin's Quest

If Uldir truly wanted to become a Jedi, this was no way to talk about Ikrit. He looked straight into the older boy's eyes.

"Ikrit isn't a trained pet. He is a Jedi." Tahiri piped up at this point. "Not only that, but he's a Jedi *Master*, and he's hundreds of years old."

Uldir looked from one to the other. His jaw clenched and his eyes grew hard.

"Is this your way of getting back at me for stowing away again? First Master Skywalker tells me I don't have the talent to become a Jedi. Now you two lie to me. Do you really expect me to believe that some flop-eared talking pet is more worthy to be a Jedi than I am? That he's a Jedi Master?"

Before Anakin or Tahiri could make an angry reply, Ikrit spoke in a low, quiet voice.

"Perhaps we can believe the truth," the furry Jedi Master said, fixing his blue-green eyes on Uldir, "only if truth is what we seek."

Morning mist hung in the air like shreds of white gauze, though how one could tell the difference between morning and evening mist-or even afternoon or night mist-was beyond Anakin. It seemed to him that fog hung in Dagobah's air no matter what time of day it was. All of the companions had gotten a good night's sleep in the hold of the *Lightning Rod*. Now, though, they left old Peckhum behind to tinker with the ship and ventured into the swamp for what Ikrit said was a very important lesson. Ikrit rode ahead on ArtooDetoo. Behind them walked Anakin and Tahiri. Uldir brought up the rear of their little group. In spite of the clouds of buzzing insects, the small odd-looking animals that scuttled across their path, and the strange burbling of the marshy water, all of them seemed to be enjoying themselves-all except Anakin.

Anakin looked around at the swampy landscape with barely concealed impatience. Why had Ikrit taken it into his head to conduct a lesson *now*, of all times? He guessed that it had

Rebecca Moesta

something to do with Uldir's showing up, but that didn't make him feel any better. After all, wasn't it Anakin's quest that had brought them to Dagobah in the first place? Shouldn't they be concentrating on that instead? The small Jedi Master rapped on ArtooDetoo's domed head to signal a halt.

"This will do," Ikrit said.

He motioned to his three "trainees," then pointed to the trunk of a fallen tree.

"There. Sit."

Anakin, Tahiri, and Uldir obediently perched themselves on the log.

"Close your eyes," Ikrit said. "Reach out with all of your senses. Feel the energy around you. Feel the life."

It was easy for Anakin to feel the energy and the life. In fact, he wasn't sure he had ever been on a planet with so *much* life. In its own way, the primitiveseeming planet of Dagobah was every bit as bustling as his home world of Coruscant, just with different life-forms.

"The energy flows around you and through you," Ikrit said. "It is a part of you and a part of all things, and you are a part of it. Even the killing of one insect can change an entire planet, and a small alteration in yourself can change the whole universe. We are all related in an intricate web, all joined through the Force. Everything you do causes a reaction and affects something else. Through the Force we can sense actions and reactions, and that can help us choose the right thing to do. Now you may open your eyes."

Anakin blinked. That was all? That was the entire entire lesson?

"We will return to the ship now for supplies, and this afternoon we will go to the cave," Ikrit said. "On our way back I will give each of you a chance to lead. I will not interfere. I will only follow."

Tahiri took the first turn at leading. She had to stop a few times to sense the right direction with the Force, but she didn't

STAR WARS: Anakin's Quest

make any wrong turns or lead them into any boggy patches. When Anakin's turn came, he could tell that Ikrit was pleased with how well Tahiri had done.

Anakin was tempted to hurry back to the ship so they could get on with his quest to find the mysterious cave where Yoda had tested Luke Skywalker. But he knew that the swamp was far too dangerous a place to hurry. He used a Jedi relaxation exercise to calm himself, as Tionne and Uncle Luke had taught him.

Patience, he told himself. *A true Jedi must learn patience.*

He led them at a slow, steady pace, sensing the way with the Force. At one point he felt a large, hungry creature in the undergrowth and was able to guide the group safely around it. Ikrit said nothing at the end of Anakin's turn, but the warm glow of his blue-green eyes was praise enough for Anakin.

"Okay, I guess it's about time I got you swamp - slugs moving a bit faster," Uldir said, shaking back his shaggy chestnut hair and stepping into the lead.

His sense of direction was good, Anakin had to admit, and the companions picked up their pace as they followed him. The sturdy teen seemed full of confidence and never hesitated for a moment. Still following Uldir, the group had almost reached the clearing where the *Lightning Rod* waited.

But something was wrong. Anakin didn't understand it, but something happened inside him. A shiver ran up his spine and a strange, queasy chill grew in the pit of his stomach. Tahiri grabbed his arm and he could tell by the look in her wide green eyes that she had the same uneasy feeling.

Then, almost without knowing what they were doing, Anakin and Tahiri dashed forward.

"Uldir, stop!" Anakin said.

"Stay where you are!" Tahiri cried.

Behind them, ArtooDetoo let out a trill of alarm. Uldir turned with a scowl as the younger trainees reached him and each grabbed an arm.

"What's wrong with you two? We're almost there."

Rebecca Moesta

"I don't know what it is," Anakin said. "But don't go that way."

"There's something dangerous ahead," Tahiri added.

Uldir snorted.

"Oh, I get it. You don't want me to get the idea that I'm a better leader than the two of you, so you're trying to scare me. I'll admit, you had me going for a minute there, but it won't work."

He started up the trail again and tried to shake off Anakin and Tahiri.

"Stop." Ikrit's scratchy voice was not loud, but it held the power to halt even the most stubborn teenager. "Your friends wish only to save your life."

The Jedi Master jumped down from his perch on Artoo's head and scrambled to the front of the group. Uldir turned a sour look on the furry creature, but Ikrit paid no attention. Picking a long, thick stem of marsh reed from the edge of a murky pool, Ikrit prodded the air on the path ahead of Uldir.

Without a sound, two large chunks of the reed fell to the ground, as if sliced by an invisible laser. Uldir took a step backward as Ikrit repeated the demonstration, waving the stem through a different patch of what appeared to be thin air. Again, the reed was mysteriously chopped to bits.

"But what could possibly do—" Uldir began.

"A butcher bug," Ikrit replied before the boy could finish. "It spins a web so sharp and nearly invisible that its prey never see it. They are sliced into pieces—and without a fight, the butcher bug has its next meal. If not for Anakin and Tahiri, you might have been the main course."

Anakin felt sorry for Uldir. The older boy's face had gone as pale as Ikrit's fur, and he looked as if he might become sick.

"Would you lead the rest of the way back, Master Ikrit?" Anakin asked.

"I think we'd all like to follow for a while."

Chapter Eleven

Anakin was glad when he and Tahiri, Ikrit, ArtooDetoo, and Uldir finally set out to find the cave. An almost unbearable tension had been building inside him as they ate their midday meal and packed small knapsacks of provisions for the trek.

He could hardly wait now to finish his quest and find out the things he had come to Dagobah to learn about himself. Anakin hardly noticed that clouds hung even lower, if possible, than usual over Dagobah's swampy surface, hiding the treetops from view. He didn't care that the clouds were the color of tarnished steel or that they drizzled a fine mist on all of the companions as they walked.

They were on their way to the cave. That was all that mattered. ArtooDetoo was the only one in their group who had actually been to the cave before, so he led the way.

Ikrit once again rode atop the little droid, as if he considered ArtooDetoo his personal steed. Artoo warbled and beeped occasional comments while he trundled down the path. Anakin noticed that Ikrit's blue-green eyes were closed, though, and that he didn't respond. Perhaps, Anakin mused, Ikrit was too deep in thought. Tahiri, on the other hand, seemed as cheerful and talkative as ever. She had brushed her golden hair and put on a fresh flightsuit. She was also wearing the soft boots that Tionne

Rebecca Moesta

had made her. Now she bounced along beside Anakin, talking about the very footwear she had once refused to even consider.

“.... and the soles are very tough, but flexible - and waterproof. They’re not at all like those icky hard shoes I had to wear so often on Tatooine. Those were made out of stiff animal hides and rubbed blisters on my feet.”

Tahiri grinned at Anakin and tucked a strand of hair that had come loose back behind her ear.

“But these boots are soft enough that I can still feel what’s under my feet. I still won’t wear shoes unless I *have* to, but these are probably the best...”

Anakin was glad to have Tahiri chattering so gaily beside him. It spared him the need to say anything, and Tahiri didn’t seem to mind his silence. She talked to Ikrit occasionally, who didn’t answer either, and ArtooDetoo. Artoo tweeted and warbled in return, though none of them could tell what he was saying. Tahiri even tried to draw Uldir into conversation, but the teen seemed to be sulking.

Their trail wound around through the swamps past the knotted roots of huge trees. The knobby roots were as thick around as Anakin’s waist. They arched high in the air from the base of each tree trunk before sinking deep into the marshy ground. Sometimes the companions were forced to duck under gnarled roots that grew across their path. The next time Tahiri spoke to Uldir, he glared at her for a time, and when he finally spoke, he changed the subject.

“What’s so special about this cave we’re looking for, anyway?”

Anakin sighed and wished that Uldir didn’t have such a sour attitude. He certainly didn’t seem to have learned much of a lesson from his close encounter with the butcher bug web.

“A Jedi Master named Yoda lived on this planet for the final years of his life. He was Uncle Luke’s Jedi Master, and this is where he taught Luke all about being a Jedi.”

“So?” Uldir said-rather rudely, in Anakin’s opinion.

STAR WARS: Anakin's Quest

Anakin was starting to get annoyed at Uldir's attitude, so he paused to let out a long slow breath and tried to keep his patience.

"Master Yoda sent Uncle Luke into a special cave as a kind of test. Uncle Luke says that there's nothing much inside the cave, except for what you take in with you."

The weather grew worse, and a light rain began to fall. ArtooDetoo whooped in alarm as his wheels sank into soft mud. Anakin and Tahiri pulled ArtooDetoo free and Artoo adjusted his motivators and the height of his treads so that he could move better across the soft ground of the trail. Then they all started walking again, their feet making muffled squelching noises on the muddy path.

"The way Uncle Luke explained it," Anakin went on, his eyes rolling up and to the side, "the cave works kind of like a mirror, to show you what's inside your own mind. He said he learned some really important things about himself that day."

Uldir snorted.

"You mean you needed to come halfway across the galaxy and go into a cave to figure out what's in your head?"

Tahiri stamped her foot in the middle of the trail and rounded on Uldir. Her green eyes were as stormy as the sky above.

"This is very important to Anakin. It's his quest. I'm here because I'm his friend. I'm trying to *help* him find the answers he's looking for."

Although Tahiri was quite a bit shorter than the stocky older boy, she raised a warning finger at him.

"And if you're really Anakin's friend too, I suggest you start acting like one." As she spoke her final words, distant thunder boomed through the air and fat, warm droplets pounded down, completely soaking them all.

Uldir looked stunned for a moment, as if he believed that Tahiri might have called down the thunder and the sudden drenching rain. But then he simply shrugged and said,

"Okay. I'm sorry."

Rebecca Moesta

At that point Ikrit, who had been roused by the rain, said,
“We must take shelter.”

The Jedi Master waved one furry white paw toward a cavernous opening beneath the gnarled roots of a massive tree. ArtooDetoo bleeped once and rolled with Ikrit into the shelter. Anakin, Tahiri, and Uldir ducked in after them. Anakin turned to look out at the pouring rain and was struck by how much the high knobby roots reminded him of the spindly, jointed legs of some enormous spider. Anakin wasn’t really cold, but he shivered anyway....

To his surprise, Ikrit picked up a dry piece of broken root. The Jedi Master closed his eyes briefly, and flames sprouted from one end of the wood, making a torch. Ikrit handed it to Anakin. Anakin knew he could have used a glowrod to light the little “cave,” but somehow the torch made him feel more cheery.

Half an hour later the rain began to let up. When Anakin suggested that they leave, though, Ikrit’s floppy ears stood straight up and he shook his head.

“Not yet-danger lurks somewhere close by.”

“I feel it too,” Tahiri said. “But what is it?”

Four pairs of eyes and one blinking optical sensor peered out into the gray afternoon. Before long, a very strange-looking creature plodded slowly into view.

Uldir snickered.

“*That* thing? We’re in danger from that?”

The huge slothlike animal had greenish-brown fur and a wide, soft mouth. It certainly didn’t look dangerous, Anakin agreed silently. In fact, he sensed that this was not the source of their danger at all. The beast lumbered over to a cluster of brightly colored mushrooms that grew near the base of the tree. Each fungus in the clump was at least as high as Anakin’s waist, and the beast seemed drawn to the mushrooms. It reared up on its hind legs to display a hairless, leathery chest.

STAR WARS: Anakin's Quest

"Yes," Ikrit rasped softly. "Very interesting. I read everything I could find about this planet before we left Yavin 4. This was in the reports."

Amazed, Anakin clutched his flickering torch and watched as the leathery skin on the creature's front pulled back to reveal a patch of glowing hide, like a glowpanel in the center of its chest.

"A spotlight sloth," Ikrit murmured. The spotlight sloth turned the light in its chest toward the colorful mushrooms. The glow grew brighter and brighter and brighter-until all of a sudden, one after another, the mushrooms began to pop. Clouds of sticky white fluff flew out in all directions. This must have been what the spotlight sloth was after, for it used its tiny paws to grab gooey tufts of spores out of the air or pluck them off its fur and stuff them into its soft, toothless mouth.

"Spotlight sloths prefer succulent flowers, but they eat other plants as well," Ikrit explained.

"That was great!" Anakin said.

"Yeah," Tahiri said, giggling.

"Wow," Uldir agreed.

Suddenly Ikrit jerked in alarm and held up a warning paw to silence the children. Immediately Anakin could sense that the true danger was approaching. Then he saw it. Slender jointed legs supported a plump, bulb - shaped body that was easily as large as the cargo hold in the *Lightning Rod*. Anakin drew in a quick breath. Uldir gulped. With one finger pressed to her lips, Tahiri turned to both of them and shook her head. If Anakin hadn't been so scared, he might actually have thought it funny.

Tahiri telling *him* to be quiet. Anakin watched in horrified fascination while one of the largest spiders he had ever seen approached the entrance to their root cavern. The spider's body moved up and down as it picked its way across the muddy ground on its strong knobby legs. Anakin's heart hammered so hard against his rib cage that he almost imagined the spider could hear it. He pulled the torch as far back into the cave as he could, hoping the creature wouldn't notice them.

Rebecca Moesta

But the spider stopped when it reached the spotlight sloth, who was still happily munching tufts of sticky mushroom spores. So quietly that the sloth never heard it, the spider extended a stinger from its underbelly and pricked the sloth with it. A few seconds later the spotlight sloth slumped unconscious to the ground, sticky white fluff still clinging to its mouth. Then the spider stood over the sloth and began to lower its bulbous body, bending all of its legs at once. Anakin turned his head, unable to watch.

He looked at Tahiri. His friend must have been afraid she was going to scream, for she pressed both hands tightly over her mouth. Her green eyes were large and round, but she did not look away as the spider devoured its meal. Maybe Tahiri was more used to things like this, he thought; after all, she had seen krayt dragons eat on Tatooine.

But Anakin had been raised on Coruscant, a planet almost entirely covered by cities. He was *not* used to this sort of thing. Uldir had come to Yavin 4 from Coruscant, too. Anakin looked back to see how the other boy was doing. Uldir had also turned away from the grisly scene, but when he saw Anakin watching him, he pretended to be interested in the spider's feast. It was a mistake.

The moment he caught sight of the spotlight sloth-or what was left of it-Uldir gagged and retched. Outside, the huge white spider stiffened and turned toward them. It bounced up and down on its long legs, as if it were testing their strength. It made a trumpeting sound and kicked aside the remains of the sloth.

Then, with two of its powerful legs, it ripped up all of the mushrooms that grew at the base of the large tree and tossed them aside. When it finished with the mushrooms, it began uprooting smaller shrubs. The spider reached up onto the tree trunk and yanked down curtains of tough moss. Then, without warning, it began attacking the very roots of the tree under which Anakin and the others hid.

STAR WARS: Anakin's Quest

Ikrit pounded a furry fist on ArtooDetoo's head to get his attention.

"This way-quickly!" He jumped down from the little droid and led the way.

Anakin held up his torch. Although it was a tight fit, he could see that there was just room enough for them to squeeze through the root system to emerge on the other side of the tree. Uldir needed no urging and quickly wriggled out. ArtooDetoo scooted toward the opening, but his barrel-shaped metal body got stuck partway through. Anakin, Tahiri, and Ikrit got behind the little droid and shoved. They had just pushed Artoo out when the tree gave an ear-shattering groan. The spider had managed to rip out enough of the roots on one side of the tree that the remaining roots tore free of the ground and the tree toppled and fell across a pool of swamp water.

Anakin and Tahiri blinked as clods of dirt rained down on them and the roots of the tree, which now lay behind them, sprouted out in all directions. Tahiri and Anakin had to push aside the muddy clumps and loose dirt that covered, them to their knees before they could scoop the debris away from ArtooDetoo and Ikrit and begin to run again.

No sooner had they escaped from the tree and its roots than with a grinding, crackling sound, the spider pushed the massive trunk out of its path and followed them. ArtooDetoo let out an electronic wail. Anakin looked around to see where Uldir had gone but could not find him.

"Hurry," Ikrit said. "The boy is safe for now."

Tahiri yanked at Anakin's arm.

"We've got to run!" They ran.

They slipped and slid over the muddy ground with the white spider in pursuit. Anakin dropped his torch and concentrated on escaping. Ikrit ran ahead. ArtooDetoo, who moved more slowly than the others in the mud, was soon overtaken by the spider. When Anakin and Tahiri turned to look for the droid, they saw

Rebecca Moesta

the stinger coming down out of the white spider's underbelly. ArtooDetoo didn't wait for it.

He reached out with one of his grasper arms and clamped down hard on the stinger. At the same time, Artoo let out a high - pitched squeal that Anakin found almost deafening, even at a distance. Suddenly, the spider seemed to think better of its attack on the little droid. It yanked in its stinger and backed up a few steps.

Then, like a child throwing a tantrum, it stalked back to the uprooted tree and began ripping up all the plants in the area and flinging them aside. When it had finished that, it tore the branches off the tree as well. Anakin and Tahiri stood still and watched in horror and fascination.

"Over here," whispered voices called. Ikrit had found Uldir. The two beckoned to them from a thick stand of trees that were much larger than any the spider had uprooted so far. Anakin and Tahiri ran to join them, followed by ArtooDetoo, who was no longer shrieking.

"It will not harm us here," Ikrit said.

"How can you know that?" Uldir whispered.

"I have put it in the spider's mind that it is no longer hungry," Ikrit replied.

They all looked on in silence while the spider finished its "tantrum." Then it did an even more amazing thing. Climbing onto the mound of soft dirt where the old tree had been rooted, the spider settled itself, pushed its stinger down into the ground, and *planted* its legs. Something clicked in Anakin's mind.

"It's just like the tree! The trees are darker, but they have those same knobby roots."

"Yes," Ikrit said in a soft voice. "You are right... each of these trees was once a spider like that one over there."

Tahiri looked around at the trees.

"So *these* are the grown-ups of *that*?" she said, pointing.

"Exactly, my child," Ikrit said. "There is a connection there, just as *all* things are connected through the web of energy we call

STAR WARS: Anakin's Quest

the Force and through the web of life. Of course"-Ikrit's voice took on some humor now-"*some* things are more closely related than *others*."

Anakin felt something rough and scratchy against his arm. He stepped back and saw that he had been leaning against one of the tree roots. He shuddered.

"I don't think I'll ever look at one of these trees in quite the same way again."

ArtooDetoo beeped twice and then warbled.

"Our mechanical friend is right," Ikrit said. "I think he is reminding us that we should move forward again. I believe we are close to our goal."

Chapter Twelve

“*That’s* it?” Uldir asked. They were standing outside the cave that ArtooDetoo had led them to, and Uldir could hardly believe his eyes. There was nothing spectacular about this place. He had expected something a bit more special, unusual... *bigger*, at least. The cave was beneath the spidery roots of another gigantic tree. Uldir couldn’t see far into the entrance, but what he could see was ordinary enough. Moist, packed dirt, decaying leaves-nothing that would draw someone halfway across the galaxy. He could sense no special magic or power about this place.

“You’re sure?” Uldir asked.

ArtooDetoo beeped once to indicate that this was the correct cave.

Uldir snorted.

“This cave doesn’t look that much different from the hole under the tree where we took shelter from the rain. Just a bit deeper, that’s all.” He doubted that this place had any special properties. It might not even be the cave where Luke Skywalker had taken his test, he supposed. What would a little R2 unit know about such things, after all?

Uldir shrugged and looked at Anakin.

“You know, maybe your uncle was just in a thoughtful mood that day. I don’t think he could have learned anything in this cave

STAR WARS: Anakin's Quest

that he couldn't have learned if he had spent the day flying or swimming or climbing trees."

Uldir saw Anakin's forehead crinkle into a frown and he remembered what Tahiri had said about being a good friend. Maybe Anakin really was worried he had come all this way for nothing.

"Hey, I could be wrong," Uldir said. "Mind if I go in and take a look around?"

Anakin looked surprised and turned to Ikrit.

"Is that okay?" he asked.

Uldir watched the furry creature nod its head.

"I think," Tahiri began uncertainly, tugging at a strand of pale yellow hair, "I think I'd like to go in, too."

Ikrit nodded his head again.

"Each of you may enter," he said. "But just one at a time. Remember, the cave holds only what you take in with you."

Uldir rolled his eyes. The furry little guy was making this sound as if it was such a big deal, so meaningful. Teachers always did stuff like that, he thought—even Master Luke when he had tested Uldir for Jedi powers. Maybe it was just something Jedi teachers did to make themselves feel important. Well, he would find out soon enough, Uldir told himself.

"Okay," Uldir said, "we're agreed then. I guess I'll go first. This shouldn't take very long."

Uldir climbed down into the cave. He stood still for a moment to let his eyes adjust, but it was dark inside and Uldir couldn't see how big the cavern was. He began to walk forward. Uldir had gotten about a meter into the cave when something touched his head and he nearly jumped out of his skin. Dirt trickled onto his hair and sifted down around him before he figured out that his head had merely brushed a low-hanging portion of the cave's roof. He stopped and pulled a glowrod out of the knapsack of provisions each of them had brought along from the ship. Turning on the glowrod, he took a look around. The cave floor was uneven, made up mostly of rocks, roots, and

Rebecca Moesta

dirt. Here and there piles of leaves were decaying, giving off a musty odor. The air was damp and tasted slightly spoiled.

It left an oily feeling on Uldir's tongue when he opened his mouth to breathe. The cave was neither large nor small, wet nor dry. It contained nothing in any way remarkable. Uldir gritted his teeth. He balled one hand into a fist and placed it on his hip. Maybe Master Skywalker and the furball Ikrit were just trying to convince their Jedi trainees that there was something mysterious about becoming a Jedi. Perhaps they just wanted the students to believe that there was something more to it than learning a few tricks and being taught how to be observant and how to use a lightsaber.

Well, he had seen the cave now, and it was full of nothing. Too *much* nothing. In fact, the emptiness of the cave began to press in on him. The spoiled taste and the smell of decay grew stronger. He had a strange feeling in the pit of his stomach, and he knew he had to get out of the cave right away. And after all, he asked himself, why should he stay? There was nothing more to see.... Uldir turned and left the cave.

When he saw Anakin and Tahiri waiting for him, Uldir couldn't help blurting out exactly what he was thinking.

"It's a hoax," he said. "That cave is empty. It's not even a very good cave."

Anakin and Tahiri looked at each other.

"I think I'd like to go next if you don't mind," Tahiri said.

Uldir couldn't believe it.

"Didn't you hear me?" he yelled. "There's nothing *in* there."

ArtooDetoo gave two mournful-sounding beeps. Ikrit, perched on the little droid's head, spoke in a sad voice.

"No, you are right. For you the cave holds nothing."

Tahiri took a deep breath, trying to calm herself. No matter what Uldir said, she was certain she would see something in the cave. She didn't know what, but something, or *someone*, waited in there for her. Tahiri pulled at a limp strand of her hair, which had

STAR WARS: Anakin's Quest

become hopelessly tangled during their headlong flight from the spider. It was a mess of twigs and dirt, and still wet from the rain earlier in the afternoon, but she didn't want to waste time brushing it out now. She needed to see what was in the cave, and she knew it would be unfair to make Anakin wait any longer than he had to.

She looked at her best friend. His ice blue eyes were serious but calm, not impatient as she might have expected. Anakin surprised her by reaching out and giving her hand a brief squeeze.

"May the Force be with you," he whispered. It was just what she'd needed. Tahiri was glad she had a good friend like Anakin. She leaned forward and whispered,

"Thank you." Then she turned and went down into the cave.

The first thing Tahiri noticed was how hot the cave was. Why hadn't Uldir mentioned how *hot* it was? she wondered. Surely that was something unusual about this cave. Scorching heat burned her nostrils as she drew hot, dry air into her lungs. A furnace blast of wind tore at her disheveled hair. It stole the moisture from her mouth, making it feel as hot and gritty as the sand beneath her feet. *Sand...?*

Ghostly voices swirled around her, some speaking the language of the Sand People from Tatooine, others speaking Basic. Tahiri could see no sunlight or sky or even the roof of the cave, but glowing figures moved all around her. A soft glow came from the sand below, as well. The strange thing was, she could see *through* it all-the people, the sand, everything-as if she were looking at a hologram.

"Who are you?" Tahiri asked, but they didn't seem to hear or see her. In the distance, Sand People rode banthas across the dunes. She could tell by the familiar markings on the curly-horned beasts that the tribe was her own-though from many years ago. A few small houses with thick adobe walls appeared nearby. Humans and droids came and went from the houses, riding in speeders, trading with each other, tending to vaporators.

Rebecca Moesta

Tahiri guessed they must be moisture farmers, as her parents had been. The humans looked almost familiar, although she couldn't be certain.

Oddly enough, despite the heat and the gritty sand, one woman with long blond hair always seemed to go barefoot. The man beside her had bright green eyes. Could these have been her parents? Yes. It came to her with sudden force that they were. Beyond the houses she saw another shadowy scene, paler this time and sparkling, as if a hologram were fading out. A scene from farther back in her own past. In this one a slender man with shoulder-length blond hair and smiling green eyes moved across a changing background, perhaps of different planets.

The man must have been a Jedi, for Tahiri saw a lightsaber clipped to his belt, and she got a strange feeling that he must be related to her. Without her knowing how, the answer came to her: he was her grandfather. Across a faint image of green grass, the man fled, pursued by Imperial stormtroopers. The man-her grandfather-turned and ran toward her. The stormtroopers shot their blaster rifles. Though the Jedi was still far away, Tahiri reached out toward him. The stormtroopers fired their blasters again. One of the bolts flew past her grandfather and straight toward Tahiri.

A flash of blood red light burst around her, and Tahiri sank into darkness. Then, without knowing how she had gotten there, Tahiri stood outside the cave again.

"Are you all right? What happened in there?" Anakin asked with a worried look.

"I-I'm not sure," Tahiri said. "I don't think I'm ready to talk about it yet." She put up a hand to smooth back her tangled hair and was surprised to find that it was completely dry.

Anakin looked at Ikrit, who gave him a solemn nod. ArtooDetoo let out a very soft warble. Uldir folded his arms across his chest and said nothing. Tahiri placed a hand on Anakin's shoulder and whispered,

"May the Force be with you, too."

Anakin hoped that he looked calm on the outside, because on the inside he was definitely not. The moment he had waited for was finally here. This was why he had come to Dagobah. His quest. What if he didn't learn what he had come here to learn? What if the cave couldn't tell him whether he would fall to the dark side or become a good Jedi like Luke? Anakin's stomach felt as if it were full of dozens of those colorful exploding mushrooms. His heart thudded painfully against his breastbone and he heard a ringing, rushing sound in his ears. But it was far too late to back out now. His mind told his feet to move and they carried him forward almost without his knowing it and then, after a short scramble down, he was in.

Inside the cave it was dim, but Anakin could see well enough. The ground was soft and slippery, like the mud outside after it rained. Here, however, unlike outside, a damp chill began to seep into his bones. Anakin shivered, wishing Tahiri had warned him so that he could have dressed more warmly. He wondered how long he would have to wait before the cave showed him what was in his mind.

Uldir and Tahiri had each been gone only a few minutes. Why hadn't anything happened yet? Anakin drew in a slow, calming breath. To his relief, he felt warm air flow into his lungs. Warm, clear light like a summer sunrise dawned on one side of him. On the other side, the cave seemed to grow darker still.

Lightning flashed across the darkened half of the cave, and a frigid rain began to fall. Anakin raised both hands in front of his face. One was wet, the other dry. One cold, one warm. What was happening? The next flash of lightning revealed a figure wearing a flowing black cape and a glossy black plastel helmet. Anakin's back and shoulders went rigid. The breath froze in his lungs.

He opened his mouth to cry out, but before he could, a second figure appeared-this one in the bright, sunlit part of the cave. The new figure wore a brown hooded robe, and his bearded face was mostly hidden. A lightsaber hung from a belt

Rebecca Moesta

tied around his robe. Bolts of blue lightning crackled through the cave, but this time they did not come from the storm.

The figure on the darkened side of the cave held his hands out, fingers spread. The blue lightning arched from his fingertips toward the Light Jedi, who shielded himself from the attack, although he did not hurl any blue fire toward the dark side of the cave. Anakin's legs were trembling with tension. He found his breathing coming in gasps. Blue fire crackled out again, this time followed by cruel laughter.

Anakin knew he had to do something. He snapped out of his stupor and threw himself between the light and the darkness.

"No," he said. "I won't let you!"

Dark lightning danced and crackled toward him and he threw up an arm to ward it off.

"I said *no*!" he yelled.

The two figures stopped and turned their faces toward him. A bright haze swam before Anakin's eyes. Both of the faces were his.

Chapter Thirteen

Anakin and Tahiri huddled close together around a small cook fire that Ikrit had built. Uldir sat across the fire from them, a sour expression on his face, his arms once more folded across his chest. Anakin guessed that the older boy hadn't believed a word that he or Tahiri said, but that didn't really matter to Anakin. Right now, all he cared about was getting some answers. Anakin looked at Ikrit.

"So what did it all mean?" Tahiri looked to Ikrit as well. Except for when she told her story in a slow, halting voice, she had not spoken at all since coming out of the cave.

"As different as you are from one another, my young students," Ikrit rasped, "the things you each saw in the cave are not as unlike as you might believe. And for each of you, the lesson is much the same. Your learning and heritage mold you. No one is either entirely good or bad. Your parents, your experiences, your past and your present all combine to make you the person that you are.

"We each contain the potential for great good or great evil. We each hold the shadow of darkness... and the flame of light. Our destinies are not set, and life offers no guarantees. It is the choices that you make... that will determine what you become." Ikrit looked at Tahiri. "It is not who raised us or who our parents

Rebecca Moesta

were that determines our paths.” Now Ikrit turned his solemn blue-green eyes toward Anakin. “The Emperor cannot reach out to you from beyond the grave-but neither can those you love make your choices for you. You will become what you become because of *your* choices... because of what *you* do.”

Uldir snorted impolitely.

“I could have told you that. I choose to be a Jedi. You make your choice, and that’s all there is to it.”

Tahiri ignored the sour remark. Her bright green eyes searched Anakin’s face.

“Is that what you needed to learn? Did you find what you were looking for?”

Anakin closed his eyes and searched deep inside himself. The urgent need to know what he would become was as no longer there. He still wasn’t sure what his future would be; no one could be. But he knew that he would have to trust the Force and make his choices carefully. And he suddenly realized that he was no longer afraid.

Anakin opened his eyes and smiled at his best friend.

“It wasn’t at all what I expected,” he said. “But I found the answer I needed. I guess we can all go back to Yavin 4 now and-“

“No. Not yet,” the voice of Ikrit broke in. “We have one last stop to make before my own quest here is fulfilled.”

Tahiri and Anakin exchanged surprised glances. Anakin had thought he was the only one in the group with a reason for coming to Dagobah. In his urgent need to find answers, had he missed something?

“Where are we going, Ikrit?” The white-furred Jedi Master bounded to the top of ArtooDetoo’s domed head.

“Put out the fire,” he said gruffly, as if it was difficult for him to speak right now. “The droid will show us the way.”

ArtooDetoo gave a triumphant warble.

“I guess that means we’re here,” Anakin said.

STAR WARS: Anakin's Quest

The companions stood around a small but well - built structure that must once have been a house. The outside was not destroyed in any way, but it looked as if no one had lived inside for a long time. Through the window Anakin could see that rodents, snakes, and flying creatures had made their nests among the moss and cobwebs that now covered all of the furniture.

Tahiri peered inside.

"It must have been very cozy once," she said. "It's pretty small, though"

Uldir observed.

"Size matters not," Ikrit replied.

"Well, it sure doesn't *look* like much," Uldir said, his voice changing and cracking as he spoke.

"Why would you want to visit this?" Anakin cringed at Uldir's rude words.

Ikrit seemed to take no offense.

"This was the home of Yoda," Ikrit said. "A great Jedi Master." He leapt from Artoo's head through the open window and sat on the leaf-littered stone floor. For minutes he sat there studying the tiny dwelling. Under the mud and dirt that Ikrit had picked up during their adventures, it seemed to Anakin that the Jedi Master's white fur had turned an unhealthy shade of gray.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Yoda was... a noble Jedi," Ikrit replied slowly. "He served the Old Republic for hundreds of years. He taught many students and fought against evil wherever he found it. But in the end, he was forced into hiding here to escape the Emperor's slaughter of the Jedi."

By the time the Jedi Master finished speaking, his beautiful white coat had turned entirely black. Tahiri gasped.

"Master Ikrit, your fur!"

"I didn't know that you could do that," Anakin said in amazement. "Change colors, I mean."

"There is much you do not know about me," the Jedi Master rasped. "My people have long had the ability to change colors, to

Rebecca Moesta

camouflage themselves for safety... or to mourn. I mourn Yoda, a great Jedi Master.”

“How do you know so much about Yoda?” asked Anakin.

“It was he who found me on Kushibah,” Ikrit said, “chose me and trained me, just as he trained your uncle. Yoda was *my* Jedi Master, too.”

While Anakin and Tahiri watched openmouthed with astonishment, Master Ikrit shook himself and flung away all traces of mud and dirt from his silky coat. Then his fur blossomed again to a snowy white. Anakin wondered how many more surprises and secrets Ikrit had in store for them.

Chapter Fourteen

Tahiri couldn't help giggling at the look on old Peckhum's face.

"I don't know how I'm supposed to squeeze in one more passenger on the way back to Yavin 4," the grizzled spacer exclaimed. "Maybe I should just let Uldir ride back in the hold—didn't seem to bother him when he stowed away the first time, since he went ahead and did it again."

Peckhum grumbled for a while, then agreed to make room for Uldir. It took some creative thinking and hours of rearranging in the cockpit, but they managed it in the end. Tahiri plunked herself into her seat and immediately removed her boots with a happy groan. She wiggled her toes. There was still a bandage wrapped around the cut on her right foot. Even so, she felt freer and more comfortable right away.

"That's better," she said to no one in particular. She sat back in her seat and buckled her crash webbing. With Anakin's and Uldir's seats wedged in next to Tahiri's, the cockpit was crowded, but that couldn't be helped. Ikrit, the last one in, climbed back onto Anakin's shoulder and strapped himself in place. Tahiri flexed her bare toes again.

Rebecca Moesta

“I was lucky my feet didn’t get hurt a lot worse,” she said. She tugged at a strand of her pale yellow hair. “I’ll have to remember to thank Tionne for thinking to send those boots for me.”

And she did.

With a smile, Anakin watched Uldir slosh another bucketful of river water onto the deckplates in the hold of the *Lightning Rod*. Tahiri squealed and giggled as the warm river water ran across her bare feet. Anakin and Uldir both chuckled as well.

Uldir went for more water, and Anakin picked up the scrub brush again.

The return trip from Dagobah had gone smoothly.

When they got back to Yavin 4, ArtooDetoo had warbled happily to be reunited with his master, and Luke had looked both happy and relieved. Tionne had given each of the travelers, including Uldir, a big hug.

Anakin, Tahiri, and Uldir each had a long private meeting with Luke and then with Tionne. In fact, there was so much talking and meeting and hugging that at the end of a few hours, Anakin was convinced that there was no one left who hadn’t already talked to everyone else. But he was wrong. Anakin was still in his uncle’s office when Ikrit showed up... of his way to take him to Dagobah on his quest.

And Peckhum would need the swamp mud out of his hold before he could haul any more supplies. And so Anakin and Tahiri had worked willingly and happily for the rest of the day. Uldir had been a bit more reserved, but warmed up as they worked and joked together. Uldir returned, dumped his bucket of water on the deckplates, plopped down on his knees in the puddle, and began scrubbing.

He sighed.

“Do you think I’ll ever become a Jedi?” he asked.

There was a brief, uncomfortable silence.

“Maybe,” Tahiri said. “I don’t really know enough about how it works.”

Anakin shrugged.

"It's possible," he said. "Even Jedi Masters can make mistakes. Uncle Luke told me that when he left Dagobah the first time, Yoda thought Uncle Luke would never become a Jedi. But he did."

Tahiri sat back on her heels and tossed her blond hair out of her face.

"Whether you become a Jedi or not, Uldir, if that's what you want, we'll help as much as we can."

Anakin nodded his agreement.

Uldir smiled.

"Thanks, both of you. I'll go get us some more water."

Uldir trudged down to the river with an empty bucket and a heart full of stubborn determination. He would become a Jedi. He would show them that he could do it. Uldir was sure that if he just had the right equipment—a lightsaber, Jedi robes—and the same training and opportunities as Anakin and Tahiri, he would become a Jedi. He decided that he would start wearing the robes of a Jedi right away, with a belt that could hold his lightsaber when he got far enough along in his training. Then everyone would see that he was serious.

Yes, he decided. He would show them all.

"There, that's better," Tahiri said, surveying their handiwork. Anakin dried the last puddle of water off the deckplates by the ramp. The hold of the *Lightning Rod* sparkled and gleamed, as clean as they had ever seen it.

"Anyone up there?" a voice called through the hatch. "Uncle Luke!" Anakin said.

Master Luke Skywalker walked up the ramp, with Tionne and Master Ikrit beside him. ArtooDetoo scooted up the ramp after them.

"You kids seem to be doing pretty well on your assignment," Tionne said.

Rebecca Moesta

Anakin spread his arms as if to show off their handiwork.

“All finished,” he said. “Our mission is a success.”

“We all learned a lot on Dagobah,” Tahiri added. “But I’m glad the adventure is over now.”

Luke, Tionne, and Ikrit looked at each other. Luke chuckled. He put one hand on Anakin’s shoulder and one on Tahiri’s.

“Somehow,” he said, “knowing you two, I think you will have plenty more adventures to come.”

Behind him ArtooDetoo gave a loud beep of agreement.

Book Five
Vader's Fortress

Chapter One

Drops of moisture sparkled on the short grass of the landing field in front of the Jedi academy. The sunlight on Yavin 4 seemed especially bright after the morning's rain. Smells of leaves and flowers drifted from the jungle nearby.

The air felt comfortably damp and warm to Anakin Solo, who gazed expectantly toward the sky. He brushed his fringe of straight brown bangs away from his ice blue eyes and then shaded them with one hand so that he could see better. The ship should arrive soon, he thought. Anakin's best friend Tahiri stood beside him, barefoot on the grassy stubble. Her pale yellow hair blew free in the breeze, and her sea green eyes also looked skyward. Beside her waited Uldir, the strong teenage son of two cargo pilots. Shaggy chestnut hair framed his proud face.

Uldir had stowed away and come to the Jedi academy in hopes of becoming a Jedi. He had persuaded Anakin's uncle, Luke Skywalker, to accept him as a Jedi trainee for a while, even though the teen had no real talent with the Force. Although Uldir was several years older than Anakin, the two youngest Jedi trainees had befriended the new student.

Both Tahiri and Uldir were unusually silent today, and Anakin felt himself growing impatient.

"We've been waiting almost an hour," Anakin said.

Rebecca Moesta

“Do you think something’s wrong?” Uldir shrugged.

Tahiri didn’t respond. Anakin shifted his weight. So far, he had managed to amuse himself by solving puzzles in his head, but he was getting tired of standing. He wanted to sit down, but he knew the wet grass would soak his comfortable flightsuit in no time. He wasn’t sure that would feel any better than just standing. Even though Tahiri was a couple of years younger than he was, the long wait this morning didn’t seem to bother her at all.

Uldir whistled a tune under his breath and retied the belt of his new brown Jedi robe. Anakin guessed it made Uldir feel more like a student to have a robe like the ones Jedi Masters often wore. *A Jedi needs to be patient*, Anakin reminded himself.

Taking a deep breath, he did one of his calming exercises using the Force. He thought back on the quest that had recently taken them all to the planet Dagobah. He, Tahiri, and Uldir had had many adventures there, guided by the Jedi Master Ikrit. One at a time, the three junior Jedi had gone into a special cave to find out about who they were inside themselves. In the cave Anakin and Tahiri had learned that their parents and the people in their past were a part of who each of them was today. But they also learned that only their *own* choices could decide whom they would become now.

Uldir had seen nothing in the cave, though, and Anakin wondered if the older boy had learned anything.

“I don’t think so,” Tahiri said suddenly. Just like that, with no explanation.

“Huh?” Anakin blinked at her. “*What* don’t you think?”

Tahiri shrugged.

“I don’t think that there’s anything wrong, of course. That is what you asked, isn’t it? You asked if I thought that anything was wrong. And I don’t. So I said-“

“Yes... yes, I heard you,” Anakin said. “I only meant-“

Tahiri gave him an odd look.

STAR WARS: Vader's Fortress

"Really, Anakin! Sometimes I wonder how you manage to get so confused even during a simple conversation. And anyway, I don't know why you'd think that anything might be wrong. Master Skywalker wouldn't have sent us out here to meet Tionne if he hadn't been sure she was going to arrive sooner or later. So I'm positive that everything is fine. Relax and enjoy the beautiful weather. She'll be here any time now."

"Well, I hope she hurries," Uldir said. His amber eyes searched the sky. "I don't have much time before my next shift working in the kitchen. I thought we were going to go into the jungle together so you could give me some tips on using the Force to lift leaves."

"We'll have plenty of time to practice," Tahiri said confidently.

"I just wish there was an easier way to learn about the Force," Uldir said. His voice had started low, but changed with a squeak in midsentence. "It always seems like such hard work."

"I guess I don't think about whether it's hard to study the Force and practice, because I enjoy it so much," Anakin admitted.

Tahiri gave Uldir an encouraging smile.

"I have a feeling you're going to start catching on pretty soon now. After all, when Tionne found me on Tatooine—"

"That's Uncle Luke's homeworld, you know," Anakin explained to Uldir.

"Right," Tahiri said. "Anyway; when Tionne found me out in the middle of the desert living with the Sand People, I didn't know any more about using the Force than you—but look how much I've learned already. Tionne is a natural teacher, and I'm never bored when she's talking. That's why I love to go along on her research trips, you know. I wish I could have gone with her this time to Borgo Prime.... I always learn so much." Tahiri looked pensive for a moment; then her face brightened. "Well, she did promise to take me along on her next research trip. Traveling with her is always an adventure. I hope—"

Rebecca Moesta

"That sounds fun," Anakin said. "I wonder if she'd mind if I came along with you."

"Yeah, me too," Uldir said.

"Well, you can ask her yourself," Tahiri said, pointing upward. "That must be her now. But where did she get that strange ship? I've never seen it before."

A ship had indeed arrived and was floating down through the air toward the landing field. The craft was very old and had a strange design, with a plump reddish-orange body and broad solar sails that collected sunlight to power the ship. The shimmering metallic sails spread out on each side like wings, making the craft look something like a pudgy copper dragon. Tahiri seemed to dance with excitement as they waited for the ship to land. When the orange sails finally folded and the spacecraft touched down, Tahiri could contain herself no longer. She ran forward, shouting a greeting as her good friend and Jedi instructor Tionne stepped down from the odd little ship.

Anakin wanted to give the two of them a chance to talk before he joined them, so he hung back for a moment with Uldir. He could sense through the Force that Tionne was just as giddy as the blonde-haired girl, but he couldn't tell what the excitement was about. Watching the talkative girl and the quiet Jedi instructor together always made Anakin smile. In spite of their differences, the two shared a close bond.

They could almost be mother and daughter, Anakin mused. Since Tahiri's mother had died when she was only three, he wondered if she did think of the Jedi teacher that way. Beside Anakin, Uldir cleared his throat impatiently and fidgeted with his robe.

"Okay," Anakin said, "I guess we can go help Tionne now." They started forward.

"Welcome back," Anakin called.

"Hi," Uldir said. Tionne turned.

Her large mother-of-pearl eyes sparkled with delight at seeing them.

STAR WARS: Vader's Fortress

"It's good to be back," she said. "Even better because I have such exciting news for Master Skywalker."

"So you found something?" Anakin asked.

Tionne smiled in an I've-got-a-secret kind of way.

"Quite a bit, actually. But first, what do you think of my new ship?"

Uldir snorted. "If that's a *new* model, then I'm the son of a nerf herder."

The silvery-haired instructor gave a musical laugh.

"You're right, of course. The *Lore Seeker* - that's what I named my ship-is really quite old. That's why I loved the design so much."

"Well, I think the ship is perfect for you," Tahiri said.

"It's just right. And so is the name." Anakin nodded.

He knew Tionne had called her craft the *Lore Seeker* because she loved to look for stories and legends about Jedi who lived long ago. He closed his eyes for a moment and reached into the ship with his mind then looked up at Tionne with surprise.

"It's in excellent condition," he announced. "I'm glad to hear you say that," the Jedi instructor said with a smile.

"I thought so, too. But because the ship was so old, I was able to buy it from a Randoni trader for a song."

"How much did you *really* pay?" Uldir asked.

Tionne shrugged.

"Just a song. Really. While I was looking for Jedi legends, I came across an ancient song that told about the very first Randoni merchants and the vaults where they hid their wealth. The trader was so interested that she offered me the *Lore Seeker* in exchange for the song. Now come help me unload my cargo, and I'll show you some of my other treasures."

Anakin and Tahiri needed no more urging. They hurried to explore the strange ship and help Tionne. Uldir grumbled something about never getting the fun jobs, but he went along with them anyway. Inside the *Lore Seeker's* tiny hold, Tionne said,

Rebecca Moesta

"You may carry this Twi'lek story-chain, Tahiri-each link tells a different part of a story. Please be very careful with it. Uldir, here is a holodisk. It holds a recording of some very old Jedi songs. Anakin, would you please carry this scroll? I'll take the tapestry."

On the way back to the Jedi academy they each carried their packages with extra care. As usual, Tahiri chattered gaily.

"I can't wait to see Master Skywalker's face when you show him everything you found. He'll probably want to see the *Lore Seeker* right away. Have you learned any of the old songs from that holodisk yet? Will you sing them to us?"

"You sure seem to have had a successful trip," Anakin put in.

Tionne tossed back her silvery hair and chuckled.

"Oh, that's not all-I found something even more important. I learned where to find an object that may have more meaning for Master Skywalker than any of these treasures we're holding."

"Well, where is it then?" Tahiri said. "In an old fortress on a planet called Vjun," Tionne said.

"Does anyone live in the fortress?" Anakin asked.

Tionne shook her head.

"Not anymore."

"Well, if it's really that important, don't you think you ought to go find it?" Tahiri said. "And don't forget that you promised to take me with you this time."

"I'd like to go along, too," Anakin added.

"Yeah, it sounds like fun," Uldir said.

Tionne frowned.

"I'm not sure Master Skywalker will approve. It could be a bit dangerous. The news about this special thing had just reached Borgo Prime, but there might be other people who learned about where it is-other people who might want to find it too."

"Then it sounds important enough that we ought to go after it," Tahiri insisted. "As soon as possible."

STAR WARS: Vader's Fortress

“Why would someone else want it?” Anakin asked, his ice blue eyes alive with curiosity. “What kind of special object is this?”

Tionne's face lit with a wondering smile, and she gave a happy sigh.

“It's Obi-Wan Kenobi's lightsaber!”

Chapter Two

Luke Skywalker, dressed in a comfortable black flightsuit, sat on the stone floor in the room where he meditated and did his office work. At the moment, though, Luke was not meditating. Before him in the center of the room stood his barrel-shaped blue and white droid, ArtooDetoo. It was time for Artoo's routine cleaning. Anakin's older sister Jaina often helped Luke with this chore, but the Jedi Master didn't mind doing it himself. He actually found it relaxing. With his tools neatly laid out on the floor and fresh packets of lubricant beside him, Master Skywalker opened ArtooDetoo's front panels and got to work.

After checking the droid's numerous electrical connections, Luke added a few gadgets and upgrades Jaina had scrounged up for Artoo: a retractable mirror attachment, a power booster for the comm unit, and a new focusing lens for the hologram projector.

A white-furred creature with floppy ears watched from his favorite perch on top of ArtooDetoo's domed head. Most people at the Jedi academy thought the quiet, friendly creature was Anakin's pet, but Ikrit was really a Jedi Master himself. Luke had just begun to drain dirty, oily grunge from the droid's wheel axles when he heard a knock on the heavy wooden door.

"Would you get that, please?" Luke asked Ikrit.

STAR WARS: Vader's Fortress

The fluffy-furred Jedi Master sprang down from the top of Artoo's head and bounded toward the arched doorway. Then he reached up, unhooked the latch, and opened the door. Luke looked up from the packet of slippery lubricant he held in his hand, then smiled when he saw who his visitors were.

"Come in," he said, "all of you."

His words seemed to open an invisible dam, because people and noises instantly flooded into his quiet room. Luke laughed as everyone tried to talk to him at once.

"Master Skywalker, I have wonderful news," Tionne said. "You'll never guess in a million years," Tahiri added.

"Can I go with them?" Anakin asked.

"Yeah, me too!" Uldir said.

"I don't want to get left behind." Luke put down the lubricant and chuckled.

"All right, I'm ready to hear your news," he said as ArtooDetoo warbled enthusiastically. "Let's start with Tionne."

Luke was amazed.

He thought back to the last time he had seen Obi-Wan Kenobi's lightsaber.

Kenobi,

Luke's first Jedi instructor, had fought Darth Vader on the first Death Star. The old man had sacrificed himself so that Luke, the Wookiee Chewbacca, and Anakin's parents Han and Leia could escape in the *Millennium Falcon*.

"Let me get this straight," Luke said. "Someone on Borgo Prime—an information broker—told you that Obi-Wan Kenobi's lightsaber was taken away from the Death Star before it blew up!"

"That's right," Tionne said. "The Hutt who sold me the information said that the lightsaber was taken to the planet Vjun and hidden in some sort of fortress or castle. But it's all right—no one lives there anymore."

"Darth Vader..." Luke said.

Rebecca Moesta

It surprised him that Darth Vader would want to keep the lightsaber of his former teacher, but it wasn't impossible. Vader could have sent it away from the Death Star just after he defeated Kenobi. Or he might even have taken it with him when he escaped the destruction of the Death Star.

"What *about* Darth Vader?" Tionne asked in confusion.

"That fortress," Luke answered. He pulled some wires from a panel inside ArtooDetoo, cleaned the contacts, and reattached the wires. "I've been there. It's called Bast Castle, and it belonged to my father when he was known as Darth Vader."

Luke heard Anakin draw in a sharp breath. Tahiri gasped and looked at Anakin. Uldir gave a low whistle.

"Maybe that explains why the broker on Borgo Prime said that only 'the family' had a right to claim the lightsaber," Tionne said..

"I thought he was talking about Obi-Wan's family, but maybe he meant you. Luke, we have to hurry. This is brand-new information, but if *I* found out about it, someone else could too. I'd like your permission to go to Vjun and look for Kenobi's lightsaber. You could come with me if you like."

Luke thought for a moment and gave a small shake of his head.

"I'm afraid I can't. The Chief of State-my sister Leia-has called me back for an urgent meeting on Coruscant."

"If Mom needs you on Coruscant, then Tahiri and I would like to go with Tionne," Anakin said in a serious voice. "Please, Uncle Luke-it's important to me. I'm a member of the family, and I'd like to see this place where... where my grandfather lived."

Luke glanced at Ikrit, who sat atop the curve of ArtooDetoo's head. The furry Jedi Master nodded. The planet Vjun would probably be deserted, Luke decided, and he trusted Tionne and the Jedi Master Ikrit to take good care of Anakin and Tahiri. Between the two Jedi, although Tionne did not yet know about Master Ikrit's true identity-they could handle almost any

emergency that came up. Ikrit had certainly been a reliable teacher and guide when the junior Jedi had gone to Dagobah.

Luke knew that the two children could continue their training in the Force as easily on the trip as they could here on Yavin 4. Two children, two Jedi. The experience would be excellent for Anakin and Tahiri, Luke concluded.

"Master Skywalker, I want to go wherever Anakin and Tahiri are going," Uldir said. His voice cracked as he spoke. "I'll probably learn more with them than if I just stayed here anyway."

Luke frowned and thought this over.

"Please say yes, Master Skywalker. You know he'd manage to come along somehow," Tionne said with a twinkle in her eye, "and the cargo hold in the *Lore Seeker* is much too small to carry our supplies *and* a stowaway."

Artoo gave one beep that meant yes in the simple code that the droid and Anakin had developed.

Luke chuckled again. He knew of few better teachers than Tionne, and if she thought she could help this troubled teenager, perhaps it was best to let Uldir go along.

"Very well," Luke said, coming to a decision. "But I'll have to arrange it with Uldir's parents first, and with Anakin's."

The junior Jedi cheered.

"If your parents say yes, then you can all go," Luke said. "But only on one condition."

Tionne nodded.

"Of course."

"Sure," Tahiri said.

"Anything," Anakin added.

"What is it?" Uldir asked warily.

"Even though you won't be gone very long, I want you to take Ikrit and Artoo along with you, just as a precaution."

"Ikrit?" Tionne looked surprised.

"Well, why not? I'm sure the children will enjoy having him along."

Her face broke into a bright smile.

Rebecca Moesta

“Oh, thank you, Master Skywalker,” she said with obvious delight. “It’s all settled then.”

Luke thought about Ikrit and all the lore and legends that the old Jedi Master knew.

“I hope you all learn a lot from this trip,” he said. “Especially you, Tionne. You may be pleasantly surprised.” Luke closed the front panel on ArtooDetoo and wiped away the last traces of lubricant with a clean soft cloth.

“There,” he said. “Now ArtooDetoo’s all ready to go with you.”

Chapter Three

Tahiri usually sat beside her silvery-haired teacher when they went on research trips together, but because ArtooDetoo was actually a copilot he sat next to Tionne instead today. Tahiri didn't mind, though. She gave a happy sigh and wriggled her bare toes.

It felt good just to be traveling with Tionne again. And, with Ikrit settled on ArtooDetoo's domed head, and Anakin and Uldir by her side in Tionne's new ship, Tahiri felt that this was turning out to be a true adventure. Tionne seemed happy, too. She hummed as she entered their course into the navigation computer in front of her.

"All right, Artoo," Tionne said, "we're ready to jump to hyperspace."

"I always love this part," Tahiri whispered to Anakin and Uldir as the little droid switched on the hyperdrive.

Uldir shrugged and said,

"I've seen it a million times with my parents. I've flown a lot."

But Anakin leaned over and whispered to Tahiri,

"I know what you mean. It's beautiful."

Tahiri sat back and watched the front viewports. In the blackness around them, swarms of sparkling stars stretched into

Rebecca Moesta

glowing streaks as the *Lore Seeker* shot into hyperspace. ArtooDetoo twittered and bleeped proudly.

"Thank you, Artoo," Tionne said. "I could get used to having an experienced droid like you around."

The barrel-shaped droid made an embarrassed - sounding noise.

Tahiri giggled.

"Maybe you'll have to train me instead, Tionne."

The instructor turned and grinned back at her.

"I probably will. After all, Master Sky - walker taught *me* a lot about flying."

"My dad says Uncle Luke was a pretty hot fighter pilot before he became a Jedi," Anakin said.

For a moment Uldir looked very interested, but then he snorted and said,

"Any idiot can become a pilot-but being a Jedi is something special."

Tionne swiveled her seat around to look at the three junior Jedi. Her wide mother-of-pearl eyes were serious.

"What's *really* special," she said in a stern voice, "is finding the things that you're good at, things that you enjoy, and then practicing until you become the best that you can be."

"Uh-oh. I think that's her way of telling us it's time for a lesson," Tahiri said.

The Jedi teacher smiled ruefully.

"Yes, I suppose it is. We'll be in hyperspace for quite a while now. Artoo can let us know when we get closer to Vjun, so this would be a good time for me to do a bit of teaching. Let's see," she murmured. "What would be the best subject to teach about today?"

"How about lightsabers?" Anakin asked hopefully.

"Yeah, tell us about lightsabers," Uldir chimed in.

"I'd like that," Tahiri said.

"It *is* appropriate, isn't it?" Anakin asked. "Because of our quest."

STAR WARS: Vader's Fortress

"All right then." Tionne chuckled. "Lightsabers it is." She cleared her throat and began to speak in the musical voice she used whenever she taught. "For thousands of years, Jedi have used energy swords called lightsabers as their special weapons. Anyone can pick up a lightsaber and turn it on, but only someone trained in the Force can really use it well. The energy blades are powerful enough to, slice through doors, helmets, people.... These weapons can be very dangerous to anyone who doesn't know how to use them.

"And so," Tionne concluded, "a Jedi Master waits until a student is mature enough and has enough skills in the Force before beginning lightsaber training."

"But how does a new Jedi student get a lightsaber in the first place?" Uldir asked.

Tahiri was glad that Uldir was so interested in what Tionne had to say, even though she knew he would probably have to train for many years before he could ever expect to have a lightsaber.

"Well, there are several ways that I know of," the instructor answered in her musical voice. "Most of the time a Jedi will spend weeks or even months choosing just the right parts for a lightsaber. For mine, I searched almost a year to find a spiral mist-horn to make the handle and the perfect crystal-pearl to use for the laser gem.

"When a Jedi builds a lightsaber, unless it is lost or destroyed the Jedi keeps it until death. Sometimes, though, a master or a parent who is a Jedi makes a gift of a lightsaber. In some cases, although it is rare," Tionne continued, "an old lightsaber may be discovered or a new one may be captured."

"Uncle Luke said that his first lightsaber once belonged to his father before he became Darth Vader," Anakin said.

"That's right," Tionne said. "But after he lost his hand and his lightsaber at Cloud City, Luke was forced to build a new one."

Uldir nodded thoughtfully.

Rebecca Moesta

“So Master Skywalker inherited the first one and built his next one...

. Do all Jedi carry lightsabers, then?”

Tahiri was amazed that Uldir still found the subject so fascinating. Tionne’s huge pearly eyes grew unfocused, as if she were trying to remember something.

“In the past there were some Jedi who did not carry lightsabers—at least not all the time,” she said. “There is a legend about a Jedi named Nomi Sunrider. She refused to touch a lightsaber for a long time after using one against her husband’s murderers. She didn’t fight with a lightsaber again until she had to save her daughter and her Jedi Master. But the lightsaber is more than just a weapon. It is a *symbol* of the Jedi. Nowadays I think that all Jedi, once they are fully trained, carry their lightsabers with—“

“No. Not all Jedi.” Ikrit, who had been completely silent up until now, spoke from where he sat on ArtooDetoo’s head.

Tionne blinked in surprise. “Anakin, does your pet know what he just said?”

Tahiri saw Anakin’s face flush with embarrassment.

“Um, he isn’t, uh...,” Anakin stammered. “That is to say, Ikrit isn’t really my pet.”

Tionne’s face registered surprise, and her eyes swung toward Tahiri this time.

“He’s yours?” she asked in a shocked voice.

“Well, no,” Tahiri said, “I—“

“What I meant to say is that he’s not a pet,” Anakin broke in. “Ikrit is actually a...” Ikrit spoke.

“I am a Jedi.”

Uldir snickered.

“The furball speaks. I was wondering why he’d been so quiet. Hey, I thought Jedi were supposed to have some special way to sense other Jedi. If Ikrit’s really this powerful Jedi Master, how come Tionne couldn’t sense him?”

Tionne gasped.

"Jedi Master?"

The floppy-eared creature spread its paws and nodded, almost as if taking a bow.

"Not only that," Tahiri added helpfully, "he was a student of Master Yoda's; just like Master Skywalker was."

Tionne's mouth hung open. Tahiri thought that if it hadn't been for the smile of wonder that pulled at the corners of her mouth, Tionne might have looked quite silly.

"But... I-," Tionne said. "I'm sorry I treated you like a pet, but why did you keep yourself a secret for so long?"

"Mmmm. Because my mission is a small one, a modest one. I do not want the attention or the honors that are due to a Jedi Master."

"Well, if you earned it, why not?" Uldir asked.

"Because there was a time five hundred years or more ago when I had great power. I thought myself too important. When I became so proud that I nearly killed a friend with my lightsaber over a petty disagreement, Yoda risked his life to stop me."

Uldir snorted.

"If you were such hot stuff with a lightsaber, where is it then? Did your Master Yoda take it away and send you to bed without eating?"

Tahiri was starting to get annoyed with Uldir. His last comment may have been meant as a joke, but it sounded rude to her. Ikrit did not seem to notice the sarcasm, though.

"On the day I nearly misused it, I buried my lightsaber. Although I spent many more years in training before I became a Jedi Master, still I have never used a lightsaber since that day."

"Well, you *were* in hibernation for about four hundred years," Tahiri pointed out.

"True," the white-furred Jedi Master admitted. "That probably saved my life when the Emperor and Darth Vader were hunting down and killing all of the Jedi. It was my mission to free the spirits of the Massassi children from the golden globe that saved me then," Ikrit said.

Rebecca Moesta

Tionne, who loved Jedi stories, looked at him curiously.

“You said you had a smaller mission now, Master Ikrit. What is it?”

“The boy has great power, even greater than my own,” Ikrit said, nodding toward Anakin. Then the furry creature waved a paw toward Tahiri. “The Force of the girl combined with the boy’s is a fearful power indeed. For now, I wish only to train them and watch over them.”

Uldir rolled his eyes.

“But I guess *I’m* not important enough for you to worry about?”

“Mmmm.” Ikrit thought for a moment before speaking. “Yes. You are important enough. I will watch over you as well.”

Maybe it was just because Uldir finally felt included, Tahiri thought, but she was glad to see him smile at this.

“Thanks, furball,” Uldir said, giving the creature a playful salute.

Tionne looked hopefully at the Jedi Master.

“Master Ikrit, you must know that I collect stories and legends of the ancient Jedi. If you wouldn’t mind-if you have any time to spare from watching over these three-would you share some of your stories with me?”

Ikrit nodded, and his floppy ears swung back and forth.

“You are a fine teacher and a good listener. It would be my pleasure.”

ArtooDetoo tweedled and bleeped from the copilot’s station.

Tionne turned to look at the control panel for a moment.

“It looks like it will be several more hours before we reach Vjun,” she said. “Why don’t we all try to get some sleep.”

Tahiri leaned over and whispered to Anakin, “Just think... in only a few hours you’ll see Darth Vader’s fortress.”

Chapter Four

“Wow! Doesn’t look very welcoming, does it?”

Looking at the small, dark planet of Vjun, Anakin found himself agreeing with Uldir’s comment.

“Maybe that was the idea,” Tahiri said. “Kinda sends a shiver up my back just looking at it.”

Anakin nodded absently. He wondered if the entire planet was really as eerie as it looked, or if they just felt uncomfortable because they knew Darth Vader himself had built a stronghold here.

Uldir shook his head.

“It seems strange to me. I thought that Darth Vader was a really powerful Jedi and a Dark Lord of the Sith. Why would he want to come to such a tiny planet?”

“Size matters not,” Ikrit reminded him.

“Well, for a ‘tiny’ world, it looks like there are some pretty good-sized storms down there,” Tionne said. “Check your crash webbing, everyone. We’re going in for a landing. Ready, Artoo?”

ArtooDetoo beeped once for yes. Tionne nosed the *Lore Seeker* down into the atmosphere.

“Are you sure you know where this fortress place is?” Uldir asked.

Rebecca Moesta

High winds began to buffet the *Lore Seeker* as it descended, and Tionne took a moment to stabilize the craft before answering.

“Master Skywalker gave me coordinates for what he says is the safest landing area near Bast Castle.”

The *Lore Seeker* shuddered and jolted, but Tionne held their course steady. Anakin felt his stomach lurch. Landings in his father’s ship, the *Millennium Falcon*, were usually much smoother than this. He glanced at his companions. Uldir’s face had turned as pale as Ikrit’s fur, and beads of sweat stood out on his upper lip. Tahiri’s eyes were shut, and her hands gripped the arms of the seat tightly.

“I think I’m going to be sick,” she said in a small voice.

Tionne’s voice was grim.

“Hang on, everyone, it’s going to get even rougher before we land.”

Although it was daytime, the sky grew darker around them as the ship plunged into a cluster of roiling storm clouds. The ship shuddered again, and lightning crashed outside the viewports.

“This would be a fine opportunity to practice your Jedi relaxation exercises, my young friends,” Ikrit pointed out. The small Jedi Master sounded completely calm. Anakin was thankful for the reminder as high winds continued to jostle the ship. He began to feel better almost instantly.

“You all right?” he asked Tahiri.

She nodded.

“Better.”

Anakin was glad to see that Uldir seemed to have relaxed as well. His face was no longer deathly pale, though he merely grunted when Anakin asked how he felt.

“Not much longer now,” Tionne said.

The *Lore Seeker* jerked sideways, and she steadied it.

“It’s only about fifty more kilometers to the landing area.” Ikrit said, “I wish to help, if you would not object. I cannot

STAR WARS: Vader's Fortress

control the weather, but if you will show me our path, I can use the Force to steady your ship.”

“Thank you, Master Ikrit. I would appreciate your assistance,” Tionne said in a relieved voice. In less than a minute she had shown him the coordinates to Bast Castle and their flight path.

Then Ikrit closed his blue-green eyes and stretched one paw toward the front viewport in the direction of their flight. Instantly the *Lore Seeker's* shuddering quieted. Anakin could still feel some vibration when winds struck the ship or lightning flashed close by, but the tiny Jedi Master held the ship steady while Tionne piloted the *Lore Seeker* in a smooth descent to the landing area. As the craft folded its coppery wings and touched down with a gentle thump, Anakin, Tahiri, Tionne, and Uldir burst into cheers and applause.

“All right, I admit it,” Uldir said. “I’m impressed.”

ArtooDetoo twittered and bleeped enthusiastically.

“Good work, everyone,” Tionne said. “And a special thanks to both of my copilots.”

“Well, let’s get out and take a look at Darth Vader’s fortress,” Tahiri said.

Anakin suddenly had a strange feeling at the pit of his stomach again. While safe on Yavin 4, he had been very curious to see the fortress his grandfather had built. But now that he was here, he wasn’t so sure....

The area where they had landed was rocky and bare except for a few stunted trees, whose leafless branches stretched toward the cloudy sky. Anakin turned in a slow circle to look around. Dark rocky spires stretched up hundreds of meters to disappear into the mist and low clouds. But they saw no sign of any buildings.

“Where is the castle?” he said at last. Tionne sighed. “According to Master Skywalker, it’s up there.” She pointed to one of the rocky peaks. Tahiri, Anakin, and Uldir exchanged surprised glances. Distant lightning flickered across the shadowy landscape.

Rebecca Moesta

“Don’t worry,” Tionne said, “the information broker told me how to get to the top.”

“Then why didn’t we just fly up there?” Uldir asked.

“Master Skywalker warned me that the wind and storms might make it difficult for me to pilot the *Lore Seeker* safely onto the landing platform in front of Bast Castle. Even some modern ships have trouble making that landing.”

“Did Uncle Luke tell you anything about the fortress itself?” Anakin asked.

“I don’t know much about it.”

“Well, I found out as much as I could before we left. Apparently Vader built Bast Castle as one of his private strongholds; he was a powerful man. After both he and Emperor Palpatine died, some of the Emperor’s followers brought a copy of Palpatine’s body here—a clone. This second Emperor was defeated too. Since then, the fortress has been abandoned, as far as we know.”

A cold rain began to drizzle down on the gathered companions. And soon the wind picked up again, chilling them all.

“I still don’t get it,” Uldir said to Anakin. “Why would your grandfather choose to build in such a desolate place?”

Anakin’s teeth were beginning to chatter.

“Guess he didn’t want many visitors.”

Despite the freezing rain and her bare feet, Tahiri had clambered to the top of a rock to get a better view of their surroundings. Her feet looked blue from the cold and Anakin wondered if she really was more comfortable without boots on.

“Um, it looks like they still get at least some visitors,” Tahiri said.

“What do you mean?” Anakin asked, climbing up beside her.

She pointed to a spot a hundred meters away, where a battered old cargo shuttle was half hidden in the shadow of a rocky outcropping. Lightning flashed, brightening the area around the small ship for a moment.

"Looks empty," Anakin said.

Tahiri nodded.

"I wonder if it's been there very long."

The chilly rain stopped as suddenly as it had begun, but the wind still howled around them.

"I think we'd better get up to Bast Castle as soon as the weather improves," Tionne said. "I just hope we're not too late to find what we came for."

"Look," Tahiri gasped, and pointed upward.

The wind that had been making them all shiver had also broken up the clouds and pushed them aside. Towering above them, on a grim stony peak, sat Bast Castle. The fortress was domed and heavily armored, with a craggy spike at the center. Dark and brooding, it looked like a deadly battleship hovering in the sky just above the tip of sharp rock that stabbed upward. Lightning flashed around it like blaster fire. Thunder rumbled.

"It's hard to imagine," Tahiri said, "that anyone ever called this place home."

Chapter Five

It was a dark and stormy day. Tahiri shivered as she looked out the *Lore Seeker's* viewport at the rain and gusty winds that swept Vjun's bleak landscape. She yanked at a strand of her damp blonde hair. Now that they had all changed into dry clothes and eaten a warm meal, Tahiri was ready to face the climb up to the fortress.

But the weather, if anything, had gotten worse. It was raining again-much harder this time - and her feet refused to get warm.

"Do you think it will let up?" Anakin asked.

"From what Master Skywalker told me, the weather on this planet is never very pleasant," Tionne said.

"I guess it's a good thing we brought thermal liners to wear under our jumpsuits then," Anakin said. "And our rain gear too."

"How long are we going to wait?" Uldir asked impatiently. "We don't know how long this rain will last. It could be days."

Tionne sighed.

"That's true. Let's gather all of our equipment together and get our rain gear ready. We'll wait another hour. If it hasn't let up by then, we'll start anyway."

Tahiri looked down at her bare feet. They were still cold, and when she wriggled her toes she could hardly feel them. But she detested shoes, and her voice was miserable as she told Tionne,

STAR WARS: Vader's Fortress

"I hate to say it, but I think I'll have to wear those soft boots you had made for me. I hope I'll only need them for the climb. Once we get to the castle I may take them off again, of course."

The Jedi teacher's face was solemn as she nodded at Tahiri and said,

"Of course."

As it was, the rain her face. Her nose was starting to drip, and the chilly gusts stung her eyes and made her cheeks and ears numb.

"The information broker on Borgo Prime said there was a stairway around the back of the rock," Tionne said. "Ah, here we are."

Now that they were getting close, Anakin looked upward.

"Will this lead us to the landing pad?" he asked.

Tionne inspected the stairway etched into the side of the rock pinnacle.

"Not exactly. This takes us to the back of Bast Castle. The last time Master Skywalker was here, there were automatic lasers firing on anything that moved in front of the fortress. He knew about this rear stairway and suggested it might be safer."

"He probably just wanted us to be extra careful," Anakin said. "The stairs look pretty steep, Artoo," he added. "Can you make it?"

ArtooDetoo warbled uncertainly.

"If he cannot, I will use the Force to help him over the rough parts," Ikrit said Tahiri eyed the stairs warily. She spotted several broken steps with jagged edges.

"Glad I'm wearing my boots after all," she muttered.

"What about you, Uldir?" Tionne asked. "Are you ready for the climb?"

The teenager shrugged and grinned.

"Hey, this kind of stuff is why I wanted to be a Jedi Knight. I came for adventure—and I'm ready for anything."

Rebecca Moesta

Anakin wasn't really surprised when it started raining again only a few minutes after they began their climb. Their protective clothing kept them dry for the most part. What surprised him was the *cold*. The rain was freezing. The stairs to the fortress led up in a spiral that began outside, tunneled into the rock, and then wound back to the outside again as the stairs led higher. In and out, in and out. The icy rain made the stone steps slippery, and Anakin was glad each time the stairway tunneled back into the rock. Even though they stopped several times to rest away from the wind and rain, Anakin found himself growing tired.

"How-how much-farther-do you-think - it is?" Tahiri asked, collapsing beside Anakin during one of their rest breaks. In spite of her rain hood, bedraggled clumps of wet, hair were plastered against her forehead and cheeks. Anakin had no idea how far they had come, and he was too out of breath even to attempt an answer. He merely shook his head.

"I think we are about halfway," Tionne said. A healthy pink flush ran along the instructor's high cheekbones. She didn't seem to be breathing hard at all.

Uldir moved to the closest opening in the stairway, leaned out, and looked up to the top of the rock spire.

"She's right," he said. "We've got a long ways to go yet."

Tahiri groaned. "These stairs are giving me a headache."

Anakin closed his eyes and tried to convince himself that he felt much better after his brief rest.

"Among my people on the planet Kushibah," Ikrit said, "we have a proverb: The path to success is seldom short." Uldir pulled his head back inside and crouched next to Anakin and Tahiri.

"Yeah? I'll bet your people always go the long way around instead of taking shortcuts when they see them."

The teenager wiped a hand across his cheek and came away with a fingerful of slush. He grinned.

"I *thought* the rain outside felt awfully cold." He held out his finger to show Anakin. "Sleet. The rain has turned to sleet."

STAR WARS: Vader's Fortress

This time it was Anakin's turn to groan. He was already tired of being cold and damp.

Tionne's silvery brows drew together in a frown.

"That means we'll all have to take extra care on the slippery steps outside," she said.

"Especially Artoo." Anakin pushed himself back to his feet and reached out a hand to help Tahiri up as well.

"The sooner we get up to the castle the sooner we can get warm and dry," he said. "Ikrit and I will follow Artoo to make sure he doesn't slip. "

ArtooDetoo whistled a halfhearted agreement and they all set off again.

It was late in the day when the companions finally stood on a broad ledge at the rear entrance to Bast Castle, all somewhat the worse for wear. Anakin had a bruised knee and chin from having slipped and fallen heavily on the stairs. At least twice, ArtooDetoo had teetered precariously at the edge of the steps before Ikrit had managed to use the Force to catch and lift him to safety. Tahiri had a scrape on one cheek from stumbling and falling against the rock wall. And so it had gone for all of them. Cold, bone-weary, and aching from their climb, they wanted nothing more than to get out of the wind and rain for a while. Tionne carefully raised one hand and waved it in front of the motion sensors beside the blast panel on the fortress door.

"No laser blasts," she said. "That's a good sign. Maybe Imperials turned the defenses off when they left. Artoo, we'll need you to open the cyberlock on this door."

Buzzing and twittering, ArtooDetoo rolled forward and put one of his probes into the computer-operated lock. The impressive double doors were five meters tall and almost as wide.

While waiting for the little droid to open the doors, Anakin and Tahiri backed up to get a better look at the fortress now that they were close enough to see it. Bast Castle looked to Anakin like an enormous armor-plated helmet with a large spiky tower

Rebecca Moesta

rising from its center. Dark metallic blast shielding covered every wall and window. ArtooDetoo whistled in surprise and prodded the huge doors. They swung inward on noiseless hinges.

“Wow, that was fast,” Tahiri said.

“Yeah, good work, Artoo,” Anakin said.

Together, the two companions moved forward to get their first glimpse of the inside. Neither of them went in, but Anakin leaned through the broad doorway and looked around. What he saw made him catch his breath. Ahead, in a room as big as the Grand Audience Chamber at the Jedi academy, lay the enormous black-robed figure of Darth Vader. It took Anakin a moment to realize that the plasteel helmet and black flowing cape were really part of a statue - a larger-than-life statue of Darth Vader that had been toppled to the floor, discarded like a piece of old junk.

Uldir shouldered his way into the entrance beside Anakin and pushed the gigantic portal open all the way.

“It’s cold out here. Why don’t we go inside where it’s warm and dry?”

Without warning, bright streaks of laser fire crisscrossed the courtyard.

“Stay back,” Ikrit rasped.

“Everyone down,” Tionne yelled. Anakin, Tahiri, and Uldir hit the floor.

Chapter Six

Another bright streak burned across the air in front of Anakin.

“Blaster bolts!” Uldir yelped in his ear.

“Yeah, that’s exactly what my brother Jacen always says,” Anakin muttered. “Only this time they’re lasers, not blasters.”

“I think we set off some sort of intruder alarm,” Tahiri said.

Uldir snorted. “You figured that out all by yourself, did you? Of *course* we set off an alarm - and now someone’s shooting at us!”

“Not *someone*,” Anakin corrected. “*Something*.”

Uldir grunted.

“Okay, fine. But whatever it is will probably come out here any minute and kill us.”

“No,” Ikrit said immediately. “I sense no life - forms, no intelligence in that room.”

“Whatever it is, it isn’t alive,” Tionne agreed. “I can feel that.”

“I think it’s an automatic system,” Anakin said. “Tahiri was right when she said we triggered something. It looks like some sort of intruder defense. It *must* be automatic. Look how regular the pattern is: two shots every second, first from the front left and right, and then from the rear left and right.”

Rebecca Moesta

Laser bolts continued to streak across the entry hall and through the doorway.

“Good deduction, Anakin,” said Tionne.

“So what should we do?” Tahiri asked.

“I’m open to suggestions at this point,” the Jedi teacher said, glancing over at her three charges.

Uldir gave Anakin a light nudge with his elbow.

“You’ve figured it out this far. What’s the solution?”

Anakin was surprised to hear Tahiri agreeing with Uldir.

“He’s right, you know, Anakin,” she said. “I’m sure if you think of this as a puzzle to solve, we’ll come up with an answer in no time.”

Anakin looked over at Ikrit for some sort of support, but the old Jedi Master merely nodded as if to encourage him. Anakin thought, letting his eyes roll up and to one side. It came to him in just a moment.

“Okay, Artoo,” he said, “have you analyzed the pattern?”

The barrel-shaped droid beeped once.

“Do you think you can use that little mirror gadget that Uncle Luke installed in your head to deflect some of the laser bolts back so that one of us can get in and disable the lasers?”

“But that little mirror can’t protect Artoo from blaster bolts,” Tahiri objected. Her bright green eyes were wide with alarm.

“That’s true,” Anakin said. “But these are lasers. Lasers are just concentrated light. A mirror can deflect laser beams. Artoo should be fine-as long as he doesn’t get shot.”

Before Anakin could say any more, Artoo beeped once again and rolled into action. Laser blasts shot toward the little droid as he trundled into the huge entry area. He reflected the first and second bolts back in the direction of the lasers that had shot them. To Anakin’s surprise, one of the deflected blasts struck the laser that had fired it. The laser exploded with muffled sizzles and thumps. Artoo moved forward and caught the third bolt on his reflector as well.

“Stay here,” Tionne ordered.

STAR WARS: Vader's Fortress

As ArtooDetoo reflected a fourth blast, Tionne and Ikrit sprinted into the vast entry hall and took cover behind the statue of Darth Vader. The fifth laser bolt struck the side of ArtooDetoo's domed head and the droid let out an electronic shriek. Even so, the brave little droid swiveled to catch the next laser bolt.

"Hang on, Artoo," Tahiri cried.

"Tionne-your lightsaber!" Anakin called.

The Jedi teacher launched herself to her feet and ran toward ArtooDetoo. With her first step, Tionne drew out her lightsaber and in one smooth motion ignited it. Letting the Force guide her movements, she drew the automatic laser fire and deflected several bolts while Ikrit used the Force to lift the little droid back to safety near the entrance. Artoo trundled to shelter behind one of the large doors. Anakin crawled forward into the entryway on his stomach, dodging blasts of concentrated light.

"Stop! What are you doing?" Tahiri hissed.

"There must be a way to disarm the lasers," Anakin said, glancing back at his friend. "Something near the entrance, so the people who lived here could get in. I've got to find it."

"Well, you're not going without me, Anakin Solo!" Tahiri said and wriggled along the stones following him.

"No guts, no glory," Uldir agreed. He scrambled after them, ducking bolts of laser fire. Ahead, Anakin could see that Tionne and Ikrit had begun flinging chunks of plasteel from the broken statue at the deadly lasers. He rolled to the left to avoid the sizzling beam of light that struck the floor by his head. His elbow thumped painfully against the huge door, but he got to his hands and knees and kept going until he could look around its edge and see the wall behind the door, where Artoo had taken shelter. To his right, Tahiri and Uldir were doing the same.

"There's nothing here!" Tahiri cried.

On the wall just above Artoo's head was a control panel.

"I've got it!" Anakin yelled back.

Rebecca Moesta

With a bright flash, a laser hit the statue of Darth Vader near the spot where Ikrit and Tionne were working. A hunk of smoking plas - teel broke off from the statue. Anakin crawled around the huge door and pushed himself to his feet. He tried a few combinations to work the controls. Nothing happened. Tionne hurled the still-smoking chunk of statue back at the lasers.

"I need your help, Artoo," Anakin said.

The wounded droid gave a brave beep and plugged himself into the panel as another bolt of laser fire speared toward them. Anakin hit the floor again. The laser blast caught Artoo on his right leg-but not before the astromech droid had finished his job. That was the last shot fired: All of the remaining lasers were disabled. Groaning, Anakin got back to his feet.

"Are you okay, Artoo?" he asked. "I'll be right back."

He went to the center of the doorway to check on Tahiri and Uldir. They were unhurt.

Tahiri blinked at Anakin in amazement. "That was a great solution."

Uldir clapped one hand down on Anakin's shoulder.

"Not half bad for a kid," he said. Anakin winced. His ribs felt bruised from diving to the floor so quickly, and his feet and legs ached from the long climb.

"Is it safe to go in now?" Tahiri asked.

"Wait there," Ikrit said. While the Jedi Master and Tionne checked out the great entry hall, Anakin closed his eyes and tried to sense any danger in the area. He didn't detect any, but at the moment he couldn't tell if that meant there was no danger present or if it was simply too well hidden.

. After all, this fortress had belonged to Darth Vader, a Dark Lord of the Sith. Vader had been a powerful Dark Jedi. He might have set booby traps or other safeguards that Anakin couldn't sense. Traps that the Imperials who came to the castle later had not found or disarmed.

"It is safe to enter now," Ikrit said.

STAR WARS: Vader's Fortress

Although Anakin stood just inside the doorway, something held him back. *This place belonged to my grandfather, he thought. But never while he was Anakin Skywalker, the good man for whom I was named.* This had been Darth Vader's castle. He had built it, and he had lived there. *How can I go into this place?* Anakin wondered.

Tahiri had no such qualms, however. Neither did Uldir. Both of them stepped forward into the large chamber. But still Anakin hung back. A biting wind whipped across the platform again, and blew through the doorway. He shuddered.

"Come on in," the sturdy teenager said. "It's a lot warmer in here."

Tahiri plopped herself on the floor just inside the entry.

"I hope those were the last stairs we have to climb. My legs may never be the same again!" With a sigh of bliss, she pulled off the boots that Tionne had given her for their trip to Dagobah. "Much better," she declared.

Anakin thought back on what he had learned in the cave on Dagobah. His quest had taught him that he came from a mixed family—there were good Jedi and bad Jedi, smugglers and heroes. His grandfather was a part of him. But Anakin could choose what path he would take. He wouldn't let the ghosts of the past make his choices for him. Only *Anakin* would decide what kind of Jedi he would become. Suddenly, his hesitation melted away, and Anakin walked into Darth Vader's fortress.

Chapter Seven

The smooth stone floor of the enormous chamber felt wonderful against Tahiri's bare feet. Even though freezing rain and howling winds raged outside, the polished rock floor inside the castle was warm. Tahiri guessed that Anakin might need a few minutes alone to think, now that they were really here in the fortress his grandfather had built. It was impossible for her friend to forget that Anakin Skywalker had chosen to serve Emperor Palpatine and the dark side of the Force by becoming Darth Vader. Tahiri knew that Anakin had learned to live with those thoughts since their adventures on Dagobah. Even so, it was something he could never forget.

Tionne and Ikrit were looking for a way into the main rooms of the castle, so Tahiri got her sore legs moving again and went to help Uldir check on the damage to ArtooDetoo.

"Artoo, are you all right?" she asked. ArtooDetoo managed a weak bleep and turned to show her his damaged side.

"It doesn't look as bad as I expected," Uldir said, squatting down next to the little droid and looking at the laser-burned area. ArtooDetoo burbled a comment. "I'm not sure what he's saying," Uldir said, "but I know a lot about fixing these little droids. My parents started teaching me how when I was about

STAR WARS: Vader's Fortress

two years old. He swung open the damaged panel and peered inside.

"Really?" Tahiri asked doubtfully as she looked over his shoulder.

"Well, okay, I was older than. two. But I *have* been around mechanics for most of 1;3Cmy life," Uldir said. He pointed inside. "Looks like we burned out a few circuits here in the area that controls his right leg." Uldir made a few adjustments. "This is the best I can do without more tools. Artoo's leg won't move very well right now, but it's nothing I can't fix when we get back to Yavin 4."

"Hear that, Artoo?" Tahiri said, giving the little droid a pat. "You're going to be just fine."

Artoo gave a happy-sounding tweet.

Tahiri was still concerned.

"Are you sure?" she asked.

"Well, Artoo won't be able to climb any more stairs, but everything else is working fine," Uldir assured her.

"He's right," Anakin said, coming up behind Tahiri. "I can usually sense if the insides of machinery aren't working right. Those circuits there are the only problem. That was very brave, Artoo," Anakin said, addressing the droid directly. "We'll get you fixed up again good as new."

Ikrit and Tionne rejoined the group.

"That was very quick thinking on your part, Anakin," said Tionne.

"I didn't really do much," Anakin objected. "You and Artoo did all the work."

Tionne gave her head a small shake.

"I let the Force guide my actions, but you came up with the solution." Her pearly eyes twinkled and her smile was warm. "It's always a good skill for a Jedi to be able to think quickly under fire."

"Why *were* all those lasers firing at us, anyway?" Uldir asked. "I thought you said this place was abandoned."

Rebecca Moesta

"It has been for many years now," the instructor said. Her voice was uncertain, though.

"Then why were all those automatic defenses armed and ready?" Tahiri asked.

"Why weren't they turned off?" She didn't like being shot at any better than the others did, and her curiosity now got the better of her. "I mean, I know you said that there might be lasers guarding the landing pad out front, but this is the back door. If no one lives here, why is this place so heavily defended?"

"I don't know," Tionne admitted.

"Probably to guard something valuable," Anakin said.

"Seems like an awful lot of firepower just to protect a broken statue and some old guy's lightsaber," Uldir scoffed.

Ikrit said, "Perhaps the last people to live here believed they would return, and so they left the security systems armed."

"It's possible that they never turned them off in the first place," Tionne suggested.

"Or maybe someone got to the fortress before we did and activated everything again," Uldir said.

"Well, one way or another," Anakin said, "I'm sure we'll find more defenses and booby traps the closer we get to whatever is most valuable here."

Ikrit nodded and gave a grunt. "The boy makes good sense. We must all be careful."

"When do we start looking for the lightsaber?" Tahiri asked, leaning over to massage her aching legs. "I hope there aren't any more stairs."

"The sooner we start, the better," Tionne answered. "If there's any chance someone else is here looking for the lightsaber, too, we should find it as quickly as we can and leave."

Tahiri got a tingly feeling at the back of her neck when she heard that. As tired as she was, she had a strange feeling that it was important for them to hurry.

"Will it be faster if we split up?" she asked.

"No, I don't think so," Tionne said quickly.

STAR WARS: Vader's Fortress

"It may become necessary," Ikrit pointed out. "For now," the silvery-haired instructor said, "I think we should all stick together."

After a brief rest and a light meal from the provisions in their packs, the companions began to explore. Several short hallways led away from the main chamber, though most of them only led to storage rooms and air ducts. Tahiri had tucked her boots into her pack, and her bare feet padded noiselessly on the hard floor. Every room and hallway smelled slightly of rock and metal and plasteel, but the air that flowed from the ducts overhead was surprisingly fresh. Bright orange glowpanels lit their way wherever they went. In fact, all of the systems in the castle seemed to be in perfect working order. Ikrit still rode atop ArtooDetoo, but the droid could not turn as well as he had before being pummeled by the laser blasts. Sometimes Ikrit got off to give the little droid a push and turn him back in the right direction.

They explored for an hour or so without finding their way into the main rooms of the castle. They found nothing of interest down any of the smaller hallways, and after each exploration they were forced to return to the huge room from which they had started. Finally Tionne agreed to let the group split up, but only for a few minutes.

"Anakin and I will take this hallway," she said, pointing to another small corridor. "Ikrit and Artoo will take the second one, and Uldir and Tahiri will search the next hallway over." She looked at her wrist chronometer. "Don't be gone long, though," she said. "Everyone meet back here by the statue of Darth Vader and report what you've found in five minutes."

"Okay," Anakin said. ArtooDetoo beeped a "yes."

Ikrit nodded his agreement.

"Fine with me," Tahiri said.

Uldir flipped Tionne a playful salute.

"Yes, captain. We'll see you here in five minutes."

Rebecca Moesta

With no time to waste, each pair set off. In less than five minutes all six of them were assembled again in the large chamber to compare their findings.

Tahiri tugged at a strand of her pale yellow hair as she listened to the others' reports.

"There were two storage rooms in our hallway," Anakin said. "The first one was open and empty, but the second one was locked."

Tionne nodded. "I managed to open it using my lightsaber."

"The whole - storeroom was full of Imperial food rations," Anakin finished. "They're not very tasty, but we brought some along just in case we need them."

Uldir made a gagging sound. "Well, it'll have to be a real emergency before I eat any of those."

Tionne passed out the rations, and the companions stuffed them into the equipment packs they carried on their backs.

Ikrit and Artoo gave their report next.

"Our hallway ended in a large circular room," the Jedi Master said in a scratchy voice. "It was empty except for some ankle and wrist irons chained to the wall."

ArtooDetoo gave a disapproving buzz.

"I believe it was a place to hold prisoners for a short while when they were brought into the fortress," Ikrit said.

"Our hall was a bit nicer than that," Tahiri said. "More useful, at least-don't you think so, Uldir?"

The older boy nodded, and his face turned slightly red.

"We, um, found a few old refresher units. They haven't been used in years, I guess, but they were clean and they worked just fine."

After the other companions had made use of the refresher units, the groups split up again. This time the passage that Tahiri and Uldir took was wide and long. The smooth walls were unbroken by doorways, and the hall appeared to stretch out of sight ahead of them. Uldir picked up his speed.

"That's a long way to go in five minutes," he said.

Suddenly Tahiri stopped still.

"Wait," she said. "Don't go any farther. Something's wrong."

Uldir stopped and put his hands on his hips. "What now?" he asked.

"Something feels wrong," she answered.

"Like what?"

"The stone beneath my feet... it looks the same, but it-it feels rough. It feels *different*."

"That's *it*?" Uldir groaned in exasperation. "We have to turn back to meet the others in less than two minutes and you're worried about the floor being rough?"

"Yes. I mean no-I mean, it's more than that," Tahiri said. "Can't you *feel* it?"

Uldir stopped and ran his hand along the floor, feeling the texture. On hands and knees he crept forward, one arm outstretched. Then, all of a sudden he cried out and scrambled backward a few steps. Tahiri rushed forward, afraid he was hurt.

"What is it? What's wrong?"

Uldir was shaking and looking at his right hand.

"It-it disappeared!" he said. "Right there. I stuck my hand out ahead of me and it disappeared. Then I pulled it back, and there it was again."

Tahiri sat beside him on the stone floor and looked at his hand. It seemed to be fine. She took the pack off her back, pulled out a heavy square packet of Imperial rations, and gingerly tossed it down the hallway ahead of them. It disappeared completely-swallowed up by the floor. Uldir threw a package of rations. The packet vanished. Then, a split second later, in a flash of sparks, the long hallway ahead of them disappeared as well. Instead of stretching into the distance, the passage came to a dead end at a flat metal wall.

Between Tahiri, Uldir, and the wall was a wide, deep pit.

"It was a hologram!" Uldir said.

"The whole hallway."

Rebecca Moesta

Together they crept to the edge of the pit and looked down. Ten meters below, the bottom of the pit was lined with sharp spikes as tall as Tahiri herself. The floor was littered with bones, and a packet of Imperial rations was speared on the tip of one spike. Tahiri felt a little queasy. Uldir gulped and sat up.

“I guess we’d better go back and tell the others,” he said.

Both of them turned around to head back, and then froze-for there, snarling at them in the middle of the corridor, stood three of the most hideous creatures Tahiri had ever seen.

Chapter Eight

Standing by the fallen statue of Darth Vader, Anakin looked uneasily at his wrist chronometer.

“Uldir and Tahiri should have been back by now,” he said.

ArtooDetoo made a soft wailing sound. Tionne’s silver brows drew together in a worried frown.

“It’s not like Tahiri to be late. Not unless...”

“Not unless she’s in trouble,” Anakin finished for her.

“Mmm. Then we should not delay,” Ikrit said.

“I sent them down that hallway there,” Tionne said, pointing toward one of the many wide corridors. Without thinking, Anakin ran toward the hallway.

Ikrit bounded after him.

“Caution, boy,” the Jedi Master said. “If our friends are in trouble, we will not help them by rushing into the same danger. Let the Force guide you.”

Anakin slowed to a walk. He could feel his face flush and he felt silly, because of course Master Ikrit was right. Tionne and Artoo caught up, with them a moment later as they stood looking down the long bare corridor.

“But... it’s empty! I was sure this was the passage I sent them to explore,” Tionne said.

Rebecca Moesta

"The hallway looks pretty long," Anakin said. "Maybe it branches off somewhere. Anyway, I can feel that this is where they are."

Ikrit's floppy ears stood up straight and he closed his blue-green eyes.

"Yes, this is the way they came," he said.

All of a sudden a loud growl rolled up the hallway toward them. Anakin heard Tahiri scream,

"Help!" She sounded close by, but he still couldn't see her.

"All right, let's go," said Tionne. "But be careful: something is definitely not right about this corridor."

They had taken only a few steps down the hallway when everything seemed to change around them. Anakin could now see the end of the corridor only ten meters away. Between him and the end of the corridor were Tahiri and Uldir. Unfortunately, between them and Anakin were three snarling beasts of a kind Anakin had never seen before. Each of the scaly six-legged beasts had a ridge of spikes that ran along the back of its head and down its snout. Spines bristled all over their short heavy tails. Their scaly skin looked as if it was covered with reddish-brown rust, and their bellowing, growling voices sounded rusty too. Saliva dripped between double rows of sharp teeth as the creatures snapped at Tahiri and Uldir.

Anakin stood perfectly still.

"What are they?" he asked Tionne. He tried desperately to use the Force to send a calming message to the animals, but they ignored him.

"They look like drakka boars from Randon," Tionne said.

"The traders from that planet use these creatures to guard their greatest treasures." Anakin shouted to his friends above the roars and snarls of the drakka boars. "Can you move farther away from them?"

"No room," Uldir shouted back.

"There's a deep pit behind us," Tahiri added.

STAR WARS: Vader's Fortress

Anakin groaned. "I wish I were as good at using my mind to talk with animals as my brother Jacen is. I tried to quiet their minds, but those drakka boars don't seem to hear me."

Ikrit spoke. "I have the gift of speaking to beasts, as your brother does. I too have tried to contact them, but their minds do not hear."

Tionne closed her eyes and concentrated.

"Those can't be drakka boars, then," she said finally. "These creatures are always mind-linked to their masters, but I can't sense any minds at all."

"Nor I," Master Ikrit said.

The guard animals snarled and moved closer to Uldir and Tahiri, who took a few steps backward.

"If none of us can reach their minds," Anakin said, "then maybe they don't have minds we can reach."

"That's it!" yelled Uldir. "Just like the hallway!"

"You mean holograms!" Tahiri gasped. "Anakin, is there a way to find out if the beasts are holograms?"

"Artoo, can you shine a bright light at those drakka boars?" Anakin asked.

ArtooDetoo tweedled and bleeped. A moment later the little droid shot a brilliant beam of light up the corridor. The drakka boars did not cast shadows. Instead, their outlines became dim and the bright light passed directly through them.

"They are not real," Ikrit said. "These holograms were put here to make us afraid."

Uldir snorted. "Well, it worked, furball. We were definitely scared."

"Do you think it's safe to come out, then?" Tahiri asked.

"Just a moment," Tionne said. Drawing her lightsaber, the instructor switched it on and moved slowly up the hallway toward the pale holograms. She held perfectly still for a moment and then, with a move so fast Anakin could hardly see it, she slashed upward. Something gave a loud pop and sparks sprayed down from the ceiling around Tionne. The images of the drakka

Rebecca Moesta

guard boars flickered and went out. In fact, all the holograms were gone now.

"That holographic projector won't be able to fool us again," Tionne said with a nod of satisfaction.

"And we have also learned something," Ikrit said.

"You mean that we should trust our Jedi senses and not just our eyes and our ears?" Anakin asked.

"That is true enough," Ikrit said. "But remember that the more tricks and traps we find, the closer we are to the treasures your grandfather wished to guard."

"Then that would mean-," Tahiri began.

"Look," Anakin said. He went over to the wall and traced his finger along the outline of a doorway that had been hidden by the hologram.

Placing a hand against one side of the stone door, he pushed. It budged. He pushed again, but nothing more happened.

"Do you think there's a password or an access code?" Tahiri asked.

Then, without quite knowing why, Anakin pressed one hand against the door and said, "I am Anakin. Let me in."

Without a creak or groan, the door swung open.

Carefully, checking for traps as they went, Anakin, Tahiri, Uldir, Tionne, Airttoo, and Ikrit entered the tiny secret chamber. The small room was perfectly round, with a high domed ceiling. A soft bluish light radiated from the walls. There was nothing in the room except at the very center. There, in a ray of bright white light, stood a crystal column as clear as water. On the very top of the column, about at Anakin's eye level, lay a lightsaber.

Glancing at Tionne and Ikrit to make sure that it was okay, Anakin reached out and took the hilt of the lightsaber in his hand. The handle felt warm and heavy and perfectly balanced. It was solid and well used, but not ancient. Anakin knew he wasn't ready to be trained with a lightsaber yet, but this one held a special interest for him. Obi-Wan Kenobi had been Darth

STAR WARS: Vader's Fortress

Vader's Jedi teacher, and his uncle Luke's first teacher, too. Anakin ran a finger up the ridged handle and over the power stud, but did not press it.

"Here," he said, handing it to Tionne. "I think this is what we came for."

Tionne smiled and took it from him. "It was the weapon of a great Jedi."

"Mmm. It is better that such things never fall into the wrong hands," Ikril said.

Just then ArtooDetoo beeped an alarm. At the same moment, a puff of smoke erupted in the doorway, and a dark-haired man with a neat beard, tawny eyes, and a deep purple cloak stood before them. The man threw back his head and laughed, although Anakin couldn't see what was so funny.

"The powerful Mage of Exis Station thanks you," he said. "I would never have found the lightsaber without your help." He snatched the weapon from Tionne's hand. "But I'll take it now."

Chapter Nine

As usual, Tahiri's curiosity got the better of her. It didn't occur to her until much later that she should have been terrified of this strange dark man brandishing a lightsaber.

"Who are you?" she asked. "How did you get here? And why did you take that lightsaber? Only Jedi use lightsabers, and you don't look like a Jedi. You're not going to kill us, are you? Well, aren't you going to say anything?"

Every eye in the room turned toward Tahiri. Anakin coughed a couple of times, his brows raised in surprise. Tionne and Ikrit remained silent, but ArtooDetoo gave a loud shrill of alarm. Uldir let out a low whistle. The strange man blinked rapidly several times, as if trying to think of the proper thing to say.

"I-well, I..." Then he seemed to recover from his surprise. "Behold," he boomed in a rich voice, "I am the Mighty Orloc. Who are you?" He drew himself up to his full height and pulled back the hood of his deep purple cloak. The silver spangles along its edge glittered in the soft blue light.

Tionne's hair glowed silver-blue as she gazed calmly at the newcomer.

"We'll be happy to introduce ourselves to you, 'Mighty' Orloc, if you'll be polite enough to give our lightsaber back. We

need to take it to the Jedi academy to share with the other Jedi and students.”

The strange man ignored her and continued in a louder voice.

“I am the invincible Mage Orloc of Exis Station, and I claim this lightsaber as my rightful weapon. It is a fitting blade for-“

“Mage?” Tahiri interrupted. “You mean like a magician?”

Out of the corner of her eye, Tahiri could see that Ikrit had climbed up onto Tionne’s shoulder and was whispering something in her ear.

“I...,” Orloc seemed to have forgotten what he was about to say. He blinked furiously again and then recovered. “Yes, I am the most powerful Mage in all the Galaxy, and-“

“But magic is just tricks,” Tahiri said. “Tionne and Ikrit are real Jedi. If you’re only a magician, you don’t know how to use the Force.”

Orloc waved a hand, dismissing her comment.

“No, I did not need to learn such things as they teach at your Jedi academy. I studied on my own. “I have magical powers far greater than your puny Jedi tricks,” Orloc went on, clutching the lightsaber handle to his chest.

“But you *aren’t* a Jedi,” Tahiri persisted. “And a lightsaber is a Jedi’s weapon.”

At the edge of her vision she saw Ikrit and Tionne with their eyes closed. She guessed that they were reaching out with the Force toward the Mage’s mind, perhaps to pull the lightsaber from his grasp. But whatever their plan, Orloc had already made his move. The lightsaber was no longer anywhere in sight, and the Mage’s face grew stormy.

“I have need of it,” he said.

“Then why don’t you build a lightsaber of your own, like Jedi do?” Anakin asked in a reasonable voice.

“Silence, fool!” Orloc thundered, pointing at Anakin with one hand. Fire flickered at the Mage’s fingertips, but it was not the electrical energy that came with extreme power from the dark side of the Force. It was something Tahiri had never seen before.

Rebecca Moesta

The Mage took a step backward toward the rounded wall. He gave a bark of laughter.

“With my powers I see and know many things you do not,” he said. Orloc’s hand shot out and touched something on the wall, and instantly one of the flagstones beneath Tionne’s feet turned downward at a sharp angle, forming a kind of slide or chute. Taken by surprise, Tionne lost her balance, fell to the flagstones, and slid out of sight into the darkness, with Ikrit still on her shoulder.

Then, without a sound, the flagstone slipped back into place, leaving the floor as smooth and solid as it had been before. It had all happened in only a second or two. Tahiri cried out.

“What did you do with them?” Uldir yelled, his voice cracking with anger. Anakin rushed forward and pushed against the floor at the point where Tionne and Ikrit had disappeared. Tahiri ran toward the Mage with the idea of grabbing the lightsaber and forcing Orloc to help them find Tionne and Ikrit. But before she could reach him there was a blinding flash of light. Thick white smoke ballooned up from the spot where Orloc had been standing. His laughter rang through the room. Tahiri reached out her arms to grab his cloak, or his leg, or whatever she could get ahold of, but there was nothing there. By the time the smoke cleared, Tahiri, Anakin, and Artoo were completely alone. The three junior Jedi exchanged worried glances.

“Are... are they dead?” Uldir asked in a tone that said he feared the worst.

“No,” Tahiri said right away. “I would have felt it through the Force.”

Anakin shook his head as well. “I can sense them. They’re still here in the castle somewhere.”

Artoo beeped mournfully.

“Don’t worry,” Anakin said, “we’ll find them.” He sounded solid and sure.

“Of course we will,” Tahiri said, taking heart from Anakin’s confidence.

STAR WARS: Vader's Fortress

"It's a big castle," Uldir said doubtfully. "Who knows how many more Mages or pirates might be around?"

Tahiri gulped. She hadn't thought of that.

"The Force will guide us to Tionne and Ikrit," she said more confidently than she felt.

"But shouldn't we be looking for that magician guy Orloc first?"

"Why?" Tahiri asked.

Uldir shrugged. "To get the lightsaber back before he has a chance to escape with it. The lightsaber is awfully important to Tionne. Isn't that why we came here in the first place?"

ArtooDetoo gave a sad beep of agreement.

"Uldir and Artoo are right," Anakin said. "This may be our only chance to get the lightsaber back before it's gone forever. But what about Ikrit and Tionne?"

Uldir narrowed his eyes and looked at them shrewdly. "They're Jedi, aren't they? They can take care of themselves better than we can."

"Let's start searching for Orloc and the light - saber," Tahiri suggested. "Tionne and Ikrit will probably find us along the way—or we'll find them."

"Well, yes..." Anakin said with a frown. He stood and walked over to the panel by the door that the Mage had used. He closed his eyes for a moment and ran his fingers along it, then nodded and pushed a button. One of the flagstones in the floor fell away sharply. The companions gathered around the hole.

"I knew these Imperial rations would be good for something," Anakin muttered. He threw another packet of rations down the hole to check it for depth. It landed a long, long way down. Anakin sighed.

"There's too much of a drop, so we can't follow Tionne and Ikrit anyway. One of us might get hurt if we tried." He nodded. "All right. We'll go after the lightsaber first."

ArtooDetoo beeped mournfully. Tahiri put a comforting hand on the little droid.

Rebecca Moesta

“It’s okay, Artoo. We’ll find Ikrit and Tionne *and* get the lightsaber back.”

Chapter Ten

Tionne opened her eyes to total darkness. A voice came out of the inky shadows beside her.

“Are you well, my friend?”

“Yes. Thank you, Ikrit. Nothing is broken, but my body feels like it’s covered with one giant bruise.”

“That was a long fall,” Ikrit said. “You used the Force well to control your slide and land with so little harm to your body.”

“You must have controlled your own fall fairly well,” Tionne responded. “You don’t sound like you were hurt.”

“True.” The furry Jedi Master cleared his throat and sounded a bit embarrassed. “But you cushioned my fall. I believe the bruise on your shoulder will be Ikrit-shaped.”

“Oh! Is *that* why it feels like an Imperial chicken walker stepped on my shoulder?” Tionne groaned. “Where do you think we are?”

Ikrit gave a wheezing chuckle. “I could use the Force to sense what is around us,” he said dryly, “but it might be simpler if we used light.”

“I must have fallen harder than I thought,” Tionne said ruefully, unclipping her lightsaber from her belt and turning it on. With a snap - hiss, the beautiful glowing blade sprang forth, shedding a bright pearly glow on their surroundings. They were

Rebecca Moesta

in a small room with rough stone walls and an uneven rock floor. A narrow metal staircase ran up one wall and vanished into darkness above.

“Can you walk?” Ikrit asked. “We must find our young Jedi friends.”

Tionne got to her knees and then to a squatting position. She tested her weight on her legs before standing up completely.

“I think so,” she said in an unsteady voice.

“Mmm. Either you can walk or you cannot,” Ikrit said. “Thinking will not help us reach the children.”

Tionne thought about the junior Jedi somewhere above them in the castle with a strange man who claimed to be a magician and who was certainly a thief and possibly worse.

“Yes, of course I can walk. ‘Do or do not: there is no try,’ as Master Skywalker always says.”

Ikrit nodded. “These were Master Yoda’s words as well.”

He began to climb the steep steps that ran along the wall.

“We will find our friends, and we will get the lightsaber back. Who knows-by the time we track them down, the young ones may have found the Mage for us already.”

“Yes,” Tionne said thoughtfully, “that’s exactly what worries me.”

“I don’t believe Orloc has any real magic,” Anakin said, “so he can’t have gone far.”

“Then there’s no time to lose,” Uldir said, dashing out into the hallway and looking both directions for some sign of the Mage.

Anakin and Tahiri followed him out, and ArtooDetoo trundled after them.

“There,” Tahiri said, pointing at the floor.

Anakin looked down and saw the outline of a sooty boot print.

“He must be heading back toward the room where the statue is,” Uldir said.

ArtooDetoo warbled excitedly.

"All right, let's go," Tahiri said.

Together they ran to the end of the corridor, but they found no more footprints.

"Which way now?" Uldir asked. "Can you sense anything?"

Anakin saw Tahiri close her eyes. He closed his own eyes and reached out with the Force.

"No, I can't sense him," Tahiri said.

Anakin opened his eyes. "Neither can I"

He heard a distant slapping sound.

"Sounds like someone running on stone," Tahiri said.

"It came from this direction," said Uldir, heading at a brisk trot down one of the corridors they had not yet explored.

Anakin and Tahiri dashed after him. ArtooDetoo, tweeting and bleeping encouragement, followed as fast as he could with the damaged circuits in his right leg. Before long they came to a branching point in the corridor. Straight ahead of them a broad stairway rose at a sharp angle, while off to the left a small squarish tunnel led away to some other part of the castle.

"I'll bet he went this way," Uldir said, pointing toward the tunnel.

"Are you sure?" Tahiri asked.

Uldir snorted. "Of *course* not. I could be wrong, but we don't have time to waste talking about it. Now if I were Orloc, I'd go this way."

Anakin nodded.

"You go that way then; we'll take the stairs."

"You've got to be kidding," Tahiri groaned. "Not the stairs. I can't take any more stairs."

ArtooDetoo, who had just caught up with them, tweedled and buzzed noisily.

"Oh, no!" Tahiri said. "Artoo isn't in any condition to climb stairs."

Anakin looked at Artoo.

Rebecca Moesta

“You’ll have to go with Uldir then,” he said, pointing toward the tunnel the older boy had taken. ArtooDetoo beeped in agreement and rolled off down the tunnel. As he and Tahiri began the climb up the stone staircase, Anakin gritted his teeth for a second, trying not to think of how sore his legs were going to be. The stairs offered no landings or flat areas on which to rest, or even any railings to hold on to, and there was a steep drop on either side of the solid rock staircase.

“Didn’t-your grandfather-ever hear-of turbolifts?” Tahiri gasped as they climbed.

Anakin nodded.

“Sure. We just-haven’t found them-yet,” he panted.

When they finally reached the top of the steps, Anakin’s and Tahiri’s legs shook with exhaustion, and perspiration streamed down their faces. Before them was a single doorway. Tahiri leaned against the cool stone wall beside it, catching her breath while Anakin studied the door. With its rounded corners, armor plating, and multiple locks, the door looked as if it belonged on some ancient treasure vault.

“If Orloc’s up here, there’s nowhere else he could have gone,” Anakin said.

“Is the door locked?” Tahiri asked.

To their surprise, it wasn’t. It opened easily at Anakin’s touch. Anakin and Tahiri each tossed a packet of food rations inside to test for booby traps. No lasers fired, no trapdoors opened, no holographic guard beasts snapped and snarled. Neither of them was prepared for what they saw when they stepped inside. A spacious chamber greeted them. Elegantly simple, the room held no ornaments of any kind. The floor and walls and ceiling were tiled completely with glossy black stone. Low benches of the same black stone reflected purplish light from the glowpanels set into the walls every few meters.

“What’s this?” Tahiri asked, pointing to a raised platform that held a huge tube made of black plasteel. Wires and hoses snaked

STAR WARS: Vader's Fortress

out from the cylinder in all directions. She ran a hand along its smooth side and found some sort of control panel.

"This looks like the tubes they use to bury dead people in space," Anakin said.

Tahiri pushed a button, and the cylinder split open with a *whoosh*.

Anakin gasped. He and Tahiri exchanged astonished looks.

"This must have been his... his bedroom," Anakin said.

"You mean he slept in there?" Tahiri asked. "But why would he need all those connectors and hoses?"

Anakin remembered what his parents and his uncle Luke had told him.

"My grandfather's body was so damaged and scarred that he needed machines to keep him alive." Anakin shuddered. He wasn't sure he wanted to be reminded of all the evil things his grandfather had done, or that he had been almost half machine before he died. Seeing another control panel in the lid of the bed unit, Anakin guessed Darth Vader must have used it to open or close the chamber. He reached out to touch the keypad on that control panel to shut the cylinder again, but it didn't close. For a moment nothing happened, and then an image flickered in the air, hovering over the center of the bed. Something clicked and whirred, and a tiny hologram appeared, no bigger than Anakin's hand. Tahiri grabbed Anakin's arm, a look of amazement on her face.

"Why would Darth Vader keep a hologram of Master Skywalker?"

Anakin opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out. The little hologram of a young Luke Skywalker turned in a slow circle, so that they could see it from every angle.

"I think..." Anakin finally said, "I think it's because Luke was his son."

"Then why isn't there a hologram of your mother when she was Princess Leia?" Tahiri asked. "She was his daughter, wasn't she?"

Rebecca Moesta

Anakin frowned and nodded.

“But Darth Vader didn’t know about her until just before he died. He knew about Uncle Luke for a long time, though.” Anakin felt a lump form in his throat. “My mom keeps holograms of me and Jacen and Jaina on her desk at work, and Dad has one of me and the twins in the *Millennium Falcon*. I think Darth Vader was just doing the same thing.”

“So maybe he wasn’t all bad,” Tahiri said in a soft voice.

“You may be right,” Anakin whispered. “Uncle Luke was the one who helped him turn back from the dark side before he died, you know.”

For the first time since they had reached Bast Castle, Anakin was very glad that he had come.

Chapter Eleven

Uldir raced down the tunnel at full speed, intent on catching the thief Orloc. Something about the lightsaber called to Uldir. In his mind, there was something almost magical about it. And he knew the other Jedi would be impressed if he managed to get the blade back from Orloc, all on his own. Lightsabers had always been the weapons of the Jedi, and this one had belonged to a famous Jedi, Obi-Wan Kenobi. Somehow, deep inside, Uldir thought that maybe if he could get the lightsaber back and hold it, turn it on, it might awaken in him the Jedi powers that he was searching for. His muscles still ached from the long climb up to Bast Castle, but Uldir turned off the part of his mind that felt pain. He concentrated on his goal-getting that lightsaber back. He had to have it.

Uldir heard an electronic squeal behind him.

“I can’t slow down, Artoo,” he called. “If you don’t catch up to me before I find Orloc, I’ll come back for you.”

The little droid beeped once to show he understood. Uldir continued to pelt down the tunnel. He couldn’t tell for sure how far he had run. It seemed like at least half a kilometer before the tunnel broadened and fed out into a bright, high - ceilinged room. Moving more carefully now - and watching for holographic traps-Uldir entered. Inside were a dozen land

Rebecca Moesta

speeders and air speeders, a couple of Imperial shuttles, and three beautiful spaceships that must have been hundreds of years old. Uldir guessed he had found the docking bay at the front of Bast Castle. He decided to be bold.

“Come out and show yourself. I know you’re there,” he said, although he knew no such thing. “I am a Jedi; you cannot; hide from me.”

It was a bluff, but it worked.. The Mage Orloc stepped out from behind one of the Imperial shuttles.

“All right, you’ve found me,” the Mage said. “Now, what do you plan to *do* with me? I am the Mage of Exis Station, and unless I miss my guess, *I* have a lightsaber and *you* do not.” To prove his point, Orloc held out the weapon and turned it on. Even in the well-lit hangar bay the pale blue beam appeared bright.

Uldir looked longingly at the glowing blade. He wanted so badly to hold it, to try it. Master Skywalker had said Uldir showed very little Jedi potential. But Uldir would prove to Luke Skywalker and the rest of them that it wasn’t true.

“What’s it like?” he asked finally. “So.”

The Mage looked shrewdly at the teenager and chuckled slightly.

“You’re not really a Jedi, are you?”

Uldir shook his head and took a step closer.

“But you want to be one,” the Mage guessed.

Uldir nodded.

“To answer your question, the lightsaber feels wonderful,” Orloc said, turning the blade this way and that-although it seemed to Uldir that the magician was rather clumsy at using the weapon. “This is *true* power,” the Mage went on. His hand shook slightly as he drew an arc in the air with the glowing blade.

Uldir was surprised and took a step backward again.

“Are you *sure* you know how to use one of those?”

Orloc faltered for a moment, blinked his tawny eyes several times, and then recovered.

"Why, yes. Of course. Why, if you're truly interested, I could teach you the mysteries of the galaxy. Come with me to Exis Station. I'll teach you everything you need to know to become more powerful than a Jedi. You don't really need to study hard, you know. There's an easier way. I'll show you."

Uldir was definitely more interested than he wanted to admit. He had always suspected that there were easier ways of learning to use power. He thought for a moment.

"You mean, you could teach me to lift that crate?" he asked, pointing to a box near an Imperial shuttle.

"Why, boy, I could teach you to lift that entire shuttle," Orloc said.

"Could you teach me to sense the thoughts of people?"

"Sense them?" Orloc said, laughing. "Why, I could teach you to read their minds just like a computer display screen."

Uldir found that hard to believe. If the Mage could read thoughts so easily, wouldn't he know what Uldir was thinking right now—that Orloc must be exaggerating? But the Mage did seem to know a lot. He might know something worth learning. Some shortcuts, perhaps. After all, Orloc had outwitted two grown Jedi and a few Jedi trainees with his magic, hadn't he?

"How do you know so much about this place—the passages and trapdoors?"

"Three reasons." The Mage swirled his cape out, bowed, and flashed a knowing smile.

"First of all, I'm incredibly powerful. Second, I have great skill with mechanical things. Third, I also located a map of the fortress in a maintenance bay just after I arrived here. My special powers helped me to use the plans and the castle's own defenses to dispose of my... enemies."

Uldir frowned at the boast. Now he wanted to see how far the Mage was willing to go.

"And of course you could teach me to use a lightsaber."

"Of course," the Mage agreed. "And to build your own."

Rebecca Moesta

Aha, Uldir thought. *Orloc can hardly hold a lightsaber. I doubt that he could teach me to use one.* But before he could speak, Orloc continued.

“Why, my boy, once I find the other object I came here for, I’ll teach you-“

“What other object are you looking for?” Uldir interrupted.

“Why, the Holocron, of course, lad. And once I get to Vader’s private quarters and take the Holocron out of its special vault, I’ll be able to teach you anything-*anything at all*-about being a Jedi. With that and my own magic, we’ll be invincible. We can conquer any power in the galaxy.”

Now Uldir was interested again.

“What’s so special about this Holocron thing?” he asked.

“It contains all the recorded lessons of a great Jedi Master.” Uldir wavered. “I don’t know. If two living Jedi Masters can’t teach me to use the Force, I’m not sure that a Jedi recording in a box could do it.” He looked again at the clumsy way the Mage held the lightsaber. “And if you don’t have any Jedi powers, that thing probably won’t help you much,” he said.

“Why don’t you leave the lightsaber with me so I can give it to a real Jedi, someone who can use it?”

His voice squeaked at the end of his speech, ruining the effect of his brave words.

Orloc shook his head.

“Doesn’t quite fit in with my plans, *boy*. Either come with me to Exis Station and learn what I can teach you... or, if you won’t join me”-he took a step toward Uldir and waved the lightsaber menacingly - “why, I’ll be forced to consider you an enemy.” The Mage took another step closer. “And I’ve found that if my enemies want what I have, it’s never wise to let them live.”

Chapter Twelve

Tahiri sighed and looked down the seemingly endless corridor.

“Well, at least it’s not stairs anymore,” she muttered to herself.

“I sure hope Uldir’s all right,” Anakin said.

“Me too. I have a feeling he’s in some sort of trouble,” Tahiri said, and quickened her pace.

Both she and Anakin had wanted to explore Vader’s private chambers further, but once it was clear that the Mage was not hiding there, they knew they would have to continue their search elsewhere, and quickly.

“I think we’re headed the right way, though,” she said. “This corridor runs the same direction as the one Uldir took. And I think I can feel him up ahead of us somewhere-though I can’t really sense him as well as I can sense you. I suppose that comes from knowing; you so much better.”

She chattered on, covering her worry with a stream of words. “But once we find Uldir and Artoo, we’ll still have to find Orloc, and once we find him and get the lightsaber back, there’s Tionne and Ikrit to locate too.”

Rebecca Moesta

The passageway grew wider and they could see a bright light not too far ahead. Anakin glanced at her with one eyebrow raised.

"You forgot to mention what comes after we find Tionne and Ikrit," he said.

"What's that?" she asked.

"We'll need to get back to the ship."

"Oh no," Tahiri moaned. "More stairs."

They were almost to the end of the corridor when Anakin stopped short and held up one hand, as if listening. Tahiri stopped talking and listened too. Voices.

She heard voices. They sounded far away, but she was certain one of them belonged to Uldir. She mouthed his name silently at Anakin. He nodded. A loud laugh rang out.

"And Orloc," Anakin whispered. Pressing a finger to her lips, Tahiri carefully crept forward into the light. Anakin stayed close beside her. Soon they found themselves on the topmost level of a gigantic, airy room, three stories high. Keeping their heads down, Anakin and Tahiri crawled over to the edge of the walkway onto which they had emerged.

Far beneath them, on the bottom level, stood the purple-robed Orloc with Obi-Wan Kenobi's lightsaber, waving it back and forth at Uldir.

"We'll have to help him," Anakin whispered.

Tahiri nodded. "Is there a turbolift?" she whispered back. She looked around the high metal catwalk and saw to her dismay that the only way to the bottom level was down a dozen flights of metal mesh steps. A network of plasteel poles supported the slender stairway.

"I'm not sure we can make it down there in time," Anakin said, looking at the stairs.

"Oh, yes we can," Tahiri said. "We're a team, remember? I have an idea, but there's no time to explain. You make a distraction and then follow my lead. I just hope Orloc doesn't have a blaster."

STAR WARS: Vader's Fortress

"I don't think he does," Anakin said. "If he did, he would have had it out and aimed at us when he stole the lightsaber."

"I sure hope you're right," Tahiri said. She scrambled quietly to the head of the staircase and looked down. The very sight of the steps made her feel queasy, but they *had* to save Uldir. She nodded back toward Anakin, and right on cue he stood up and began yelling.

"Hey, Orloc!" he shouted. "Up here! If you hurt Uldir, you'll be making a big mistake, you know."

It worked. The thin Mage with the long dark hair turned and looked up to where Anakin was standing. This was the chance Tahiri had been waiting for. She pulled herself up onto the stair railing on the side away from the Mage and swung herself over it. Holding on to the rail with both hands, she wrapped her aching legs around one of the tall poles that supported a corner of the staircase. Then, using her teeth, she yanked the sleeve of her flightsuit up over one hand to protect it and let go of the railing with the other.

Tahiri whizzed down the smooth pole, controlling her speed by tightening or loosening her grip. Anakin kept Orloc's attention, and in seconds Tahiri had reached the floor. Her legs felt so weak, they almost refused to hold her up when she touched down, but she hung on to the pole with both hands to steady herself. Tahiri peeked around the edge of the stairway toward the Mage. She let her eyes fall half closed and tried to visualize pulling the lightsaber from his hand. She had often managed to lift pebbles and leaves and even heavy objects during training, but not usually while someone was holding them-or while someone was moving the objects around, for that matter.

This time she couldn't manage it. Orloc must have felt the tug at his weapon, because he gave a surprised shout and grasped the hilt with both hands. Tahiri ducked back behind the stairway.

"Time for the backup plan," she muttered to herself. Oh, how she wished that Tionne and Ikrit were with them. Well, until they arrived it was up to her and Anakin to rescue Uldir and the

Rebecca Moesta

lightsaber. She decided to rely on the things she *knew* she could do, so she resorted to one of her strongest weapons: talking.

“Mage Orloc, put down your weapon,” she said, stepping out into plain view. She had to keep the Mage busy long enough for Uldir to get out of his reach. “None of us means you any harm. We only want the lightsaber you took, because it’s very special to us.”

The Mage turned his tawny eyes toward Tahiri, and Uldir began backing carefully away from him. Encouraged, Tahiri continued talking.

“And even if you have some kind of magic, that lightsaber won’t be worth much to you without Jedi powers, without the Force to guide you.” Tahiri heard a soft thump as Anakin slid down one of the stair supports and landed behind her.

“Why, that’s a nice story, little girl,” Orloc said with a harsh laugh. “But I have special plans - and they include a lightsaber. I see no reason to give this one up when I have it right here in my hand.” He lowered the blade so that it pointed directly at Tahiri and swung it back and forth a few times. He could not control it very well. It bobbed and wobbled in the air.

Uldir backed farther away. *Good*, Tahiri thought, *Uldir is almost safe*. But then she realized that *she* was in trouble now, even if Orloc only meant to frighten her. He was so unskilled with the lightsaber that she might truly be in danger. Suddenly a small crate drifted through the air and bumped Orloc’s arm. Startled, the Mage slashed with his lightsaber blade and then gaped in surprise when the little carton dropped to the floor in two smoking pieces. He fell back a few paces and stared at it. Then another carton drifted toward him. Tahiri got the idea. Anakin must be using the Force to lift simple objects.

The second crate nudged the Mage a bit harder. Tahiri heard a low warble in back of her and realized that ArtooDetoo had found his way into the hangar bay.

STAR WARS: Vader's Fortress

"We don't want to hurt you, Mage Orloc," she said, comforted to know that Anakin and Artoo were just behind her, hidden by the stairway. Orloc slashed at the second box.

"Why, fortunately, I'm not limited by such small thoughts. I'm going to leave here with this lightsaber, and I'm ready to hurt *you* to do it."

Suddenly Tahiri heard a *whoosh* like the sound of a lightsaber being ignited.

"I'm afraid I can't let you do that," the Jedi teacher Tionne's voice said from behind Orloc. The Mage stepped to one side and turned. Past him, Tahiri saw the silvery-haired instructor climb up through what must have been a trapdoor that led up from beneath the hangar bay.

"I would rather not fight you," Tionne said. "But I will not allow you to hurt anyone in this room."

"Anakin," Tahiri whispered, "can Artoo help us?"

"Hah," Orloc said, pushing his purple cloak back from his shoulders. "What makes you think you can stop me?"

Ikrit clambered up out of the hole behind Tionne and crouched, watching the scene.

"The Force is with me," Tionne said. She swept a hand around to indicate Ikrit and the children. "The Force is with all of us."

"Well, Force or no Force, you don't look like much of a fighter," Orloc said. "I'll take my chances." He raised his glowing blade high in the air, ready to slice down on Tionne.

"Artoo, give me a high-frequency blast at full power," Anakin whispered. Instantly a siren wail blared out of the little droid; the painfully loud alarm filled the entire hangar bay. The moment Orloc turned to look for the source of the sound, his lightsaber jumped from his grasp, flickered out, and floated away from him, high in the air over his head. Before anyone realized what had happened, smoke spouted up from the place where Orloc stood, and when it cleared the Mage was gone.

Rebecca Moesta

"I wonder how he does that," Anakin said as the reunited companions gathered in the center of the hangar bay.

"I don't know, but at least he's gone," Tahiri said. She noticed that Ikrit-with Obi-Wan Kenobi's lightsaber in his furry paw-was carefully inspecting one of the ancient spaceships housed in the hangar bay.

"I'm not so sure," Uldir said. "By the way, thanks for coming to my rescue-all of you. You too, furball," he added, glancing at Ikrit.

"What do you mean you're not sure, Uldir?" Tionne asked. "I mean I don't think he has gone yet," Uldir said. "He was looking for something called a holocr... Holocron. Yeah, that's it."

"There's a Holocron?" Tionne breathed. "Here? In Bast Castle? Where?"

"I think he said it was in some sort of room that Darth Vader used... his private quarters maybe." Anakin and Tahiri looked at each other.

"Now *that's* interesting," Anakin said. Tahiri grinned at Tionne. "If you really want to find that Holocron, I think Anakin and I can lead you to Vader's private quarters."

Chapter Thirteen

The glossy black walls and ceiling and floor of Darth Vader's personal chambers gleamed softly in the dim light. Uldir was impressed. It had been well over a decade since Darth Vader's death, and yet this room still felt like it belonged to a very powerful man. When Vader turned to the dark side, he had pledged himself to the Emperor's service—but look at all he had gotten in return! *Not a bad trade*, Uldir thought. Darth Vader's name had been known throughout the galaxy and he had enjoyed wealth and power for many years. Darth Vader had chosen to be a powerful lord, not just an average Jedi.

And best of all, Uldir mused, Vader had turned back to the light side at the end before he died, so that his family now remembered him with honor—and had even named a grandchild after him. Anakin's voice broke into Uldir's thoughts.

"Okay, I've got it." The teenager turned and saw that Anakin was standing by a stone panel at the head of Darth Vader's sleeping cylinder. The slab looked just like all the other rock that lined the walls. When Anakin pushed on it, though, it slid silently to one side, revealing a small storage safe that opened at Anakin's voice command.

"Is it there?" Uldir asked.

Rebecca Moesta

He thought of how exciting it would be to learn Jedi lessons about real power.

“Sure looks like it,” Tahiri said.

ArtooDetoo burbled enthusiastically. Ikrit climbed onto ArtooDetoo’s domed head as Anakin withdrew the object from the safe.

“That’s the Holocron all right,” Tionne said. “It must be.”

“Yes, an old one,” Ikrit confirmed.

Anakin placed the glossy cube-shaped object into Tionne’s hands, and Uldir moved closer. Her cheeks flushed and pink, the Jedi instructor looked at them with shining eyes.

“This is a great treasure that belongs to all Jedi,” she said. “It contains the teaching of a Jedi Master. Most Holocrons hold teachings of some sort, and some also contain songs, stories, legends.... This is a great historical find. We’ll take it to Master Skywalker at once.” Tionne began leading them all toward the room’s main entrance.

“We can’t let such an important treasure fall into the wrong hands or be used for one person’s gain or glory.”

“Does that mean we’re leaving right now?” Anakin said.

“Uh-oh,” groaned Tahiri. “More stairs.”

Tionne smiled gratefully at Uldir. “Thank you very much for telling us the Holocron was here. I’m so excited I can hardly wait to see what it holds.”

“Neither can I,” said Uldir. “But how do we know it even works?”

The instructor’s pearly eyes blinked with surprise.

“I, well... I suppose we don’t. I think it would be all right to test it.”

She sat on the floor and held her hands out in front of her, palms up. The others arranged themselves in a loose circle around the Holocron and sat down to watch.

“Just a minute,” Tionne said. The strange object rested lightly on her hands, as if floating on water. A hologram blossomed in the air over the Holocron.

STAR WARS: Vader's Fortress

"Welcome, my children. How may I teach you today? I am Ash Krimsan," said the glowing figure of a tiny plump woman with black hair and eyes the color of smoky topaz. She wore a long soft gown as red as wine. "I am a Jedi Master whose duty it has always been to teach those young ones who are gifted in the Force. Even before they become Jedi, the powerful ones must learn why they can sense people's feelings and how not to misuse that power. They must learn patience and Jedi relaxation techniques, and many other important things."

The old woman's face shone with patient kindness.

"Come listen to me, my child, and I will teach you."

Oh great. Baby lessons, Uldir thought. *Just what I need.* Well, he told himself, at least it looked as if the old lady would cover everything he might need to know to become a Jedi. And after all, he was pretty intelligent-how long could it take to learn it all?

"Let us begin with a Jedi relaxation technique. First I will show you how it looks on the outside; then I will describe how it feels inside."

Suddenly the hologram was hidden by a cloud of roiling gray smoke. Uldir coughed. At first, he didn't understand what was happening. Then he saw a flash of purple cloth and heard a gloating voice say,

"Why, you didn't really think I would give up my prize so easily, did you?"

Uldir came to his feet, waving smoke away from his eyes. The Holocron was gone.

"Neither will we, Orloc," he said.

"Then you'll have to catch me," the Mage countered.

Anakin looked around to see where Orloc might have gone with the Holocron. Ikrit or Tionne must have used the Force to clear the smoke away, he guessed, because within a second or two it was almost gone. The two Jedi opened the main chamber door and looked up and down the passageway. With a *whoosh*, the doors shut behind them, locking them out.

Rebecca Moesta

“He’s in here!” Anakin shouted, pointing to the far end of the chamber behind the platform that held Darth Vader’s sleeping cylinder. Orloc stood beside a control panel that had been hidden by a slab of polished black stone. ArtooDetoo trilled a warning and moved to the door control panel by the main entrance, just behind Anakin.

“I’m coming,” Tahiri called.

The Mage pressed a button-and Anakin jumped to safety a split second before a trapdoor opened in the floor where he had been standing. ArtooDetoo tweedled frantically but was unable to close the pit in back of Anakin. Anakin ran toward the Mage, who growled and pressed another button. Somewhere behind Anakin, Tahiri squealed. She must have jumped over a trapdoor, too, because the next sound heard was the slap of her bare feet on the polished floor as she landed behind him. ArtooDetoo chittered angrily at the magician. Anakin kept running forward, with Tahiri following close after him. The Mage merely chuckled and pushed a button to unseal a set of double doors behind him that led out of the chamber.

They swung outward. Then, with one arm clutching the Holocron tightly to his chest, he reached out to push a final button on the control panel. A new trapdoor angled open between Anakin and the Mage, who stood in the doorway he had just unlocked. Anakin stopped running and skidded to a halt right at the edge of the hole, with its steep, steep slide down into the secret depths of Bast Castle. Tahiri pulled him back before he could lose his balance and fall in. He gulped at the close call and glanced up to see a grin on Orloc’s neatly bearded face, as if the magician were hoping they would fall down the chute. The purple-robed Mage shrugged.

“Too bad. Maybe some other day, hmmm?”

He turned to leave. But ArtooDetoo had managed to reverse the double doors from his control panel across the room. They were now swinging back toward Orloc. Soon there would be no place for the magician to stand as the doors swept backward

STAR WARS: Vader's Fortress

toward the hole in the floor. Beside Anakin, Tahiri gasped. The Mage tried to push the doors forward, away from the edge of the pit. Anakin and Tahiri both stretched out their arms, trying to reach Orloc, but it was no use.

As the doors shut he gave a yelp of alarm and flailed his arms in an attempt to keep his balance.

"Can you close the pit, Artoo?" Anakin called.

Artoo buzzed twice.

Orloc threw his arms high into the air and let go of the precious Jedi cube, perhaps trying to grab on to something before he fell. The bobbled Holocron flew over Anakin's and Tahiri's heads as Orloc tumbled into the stone chute. Dashing up behind them, Uldir caught the Holocron.

"Got it!" he yelled. His voice cracked with triumph. At the door, Artoo finally succeeded in opening the main entrance again for Ikrit and Tionne. The two Jedi rushed back in. With mixed feelings, Anakin looked down into the dark chute. He *should* have been able to do something more to keep Orloc from falling-but if they had managed to save him, wouldn't the Mage have tried to steal the Holocron from them again?

"Do you think he'll be all right?" Tahiri asked, looking down into the pit with a horrified expression on her face.

"Ikrit and I survived our fall," Tionne said softly from the other side of the room. "I think Orloc will be all right."

"Mmmm," Ikrit said. "I believe he is unhurt, that one."

"In fact," Tionne added with a dry note in her voice, "unless we get out of here soon, we probably haven't seen the last of him yet."

Chapter Fourteen

The unusual things they had seen and done since coming to Bast Castle amazed Anakin, but in the end there was one more surprise to come. Weary as the companions were, they were preparing to make the long climb back down to the *Lore Seeker* when Ikrit made a suggestion.

“There is another way to get to your ship,” he said. Even before hearing his plan, Tahiri was enthusiastic. Ikrit took them back to the hangar bay and showed them the ancient ships stored there. He had once owned just such a ship himself, and the controls could adjust to Ikrit’s one-meter height. If the ships were kept in as good mechanical repair as everything else in Bast Castle seemed to be, it would take only a matter of minutes to fly down to the *Lore Seeker*.

When a preflight check on their chosen ship showed that it was in excellent condition, everyone eagerly agreed to Ikrit’s plan. After ArtooDetoo plugged into a control panel to open the hangar bay doors and make sure that all intruder defenses were turned off, they put Ikrit’s plan into effect. Ikrit did an expert job of piloting the old ship, and when they reached the *Lore Seeker* he seemed almost sad.

Now it was Anakin’s turn to make a surprising suggestion.

STAR WARS: Vader's Fortress

"Why don't you keep the ship, Ikrit," he said. "It belonged to my grandfather, so I don't think there's anyone else who has a claim to it-and the controls are so old-fashioned that I'm not sure any other being would *want* it."

The Jedi Master seemed uncertain and looked hopefully at Tionne. A smile of delight spread across her face.

"Of course-it would be just perfect for you."

Anakin could have predicted that Tionne would like the idea, since she had such a love of history. Then Tionne frowned for a moment and looked over at Anakin.

"But are you sure it's safe for him to fly it all the way back to Yavin 4?"

Anakin nodded. One of his special skills with the Force was knowing when machinery was working correctly, and he could sense that this ship was perfectly spaceworthy.

"It's in great shape," Uldir agreed. "I'll even be his copilot if you like. I've been a trained pilot for years, you know."

Tionne looked very pleased at this development. "Well, if it's all right with Ikrit, I guess it's all settled."

"You'll have to find a name for your ship by the time you get back to Yavin 4," Tahiri said, grinning. "I'll ask you about it."

To Anakin it seemed that Ikrit's white fur glowed with pride.

"Mmmm," the Jedi Master said, nodding. "I will find a name for my ship."

A sea of green trees rippled below the *Lore Seeker* as it glided toward the landing field and the Jedi academy. For Anakin, the sight of the Great Temple standing in its clearing, drenched in bright sunlight, was a very welcome one indeed.

"It feels good to be back," he said with a sigh. Tahiri giggled. "That was certainly more of an adventure than I had bargained for."

Tionne looked at her two students.

"Are you sorry you came with me?"

Anakin shook his head.

Rebecca Moesta

“The trip was worth making. I learned some interesting things about Darth Vader.”

“I learned to trust the Force and not just my eyes and ears,” Tahiri said.

“And we did find a lightsaber and a Holocron,” Anakin said.

“And a new ship for Ikrit,” Tahiri added. “So I think we’re glad we came along, but it may be a while before we go looking for adventures again.”

Tionne brought the *Lore Seeker* down on the landing field, where Luke Skywalker was waiting for them. As soon as she opened the exit hatch, Anakin and Tahiri tumbled out of the ship, anxious to greet Luke and share their news with him.

“We’ve got some surprises for you, Uncle Luke,” Anakin said.

“Just wait until you see what we’ve found,” Tahiri said. “You’ll never believe it.” Her green eyes danced with excitement. “We’ll have to let Tionne tell you the biggest news, though.”

Tionne came out of the *Lore Seeker* then, followed by ArtooDetoo, who burred a happy greeting.

“It’s good to have you back, Artoo,” Luke said. “From all the excitement, I take it you found the lightsaber.”

“And more,” Tionne answered, holding out the Holocron for him to see. “Master Ikrit has the lightsaber with him.”

“But where *are* Uldir and Ikrit?” Luke asked, looking at the new Holocron with wonder.

“There,” said Tionne, pointing to a speck above the treetops with a proud smile.

“We found a new ship, and Ikrit’s flying it,” Anakin explained.

“A really *old* ship, actually,” Tahiri put in.

Luke’s eyebrows went up. “That certainly is interesting news,” he said. He watched with fascination while the ancient ship landed a short way from the *Lore Seeker* and Ikrit and Uldir got out.

“Welcome back,” Luke said. “Let’s all go inside where you can rest and share your news with me.”

STAR WARS: Vader's Fortress

"What did you name the ship?" Tahiri asked Ikrit as they walked back toward the Great Temple.

"It's a good name," Uldir said, but he seemed distracted. The teenager stopped and looked up at the sky, as if still thinking about their adventure and the strange Mage they had met.

"I have named her the *Sunrider*," said Ikrit.

"After Nomi Sunrider?" Tionne asked with a delighted smile.

"Yes, the Jedi Master who lived long ago," Ikrit said.

Everyone approved of the name.

When they reached the base of the Great Temple, Luke started to climb the steps that ran up one of its four sides. Tahiri groaned and stood as still as if her bare feet were rooted to the ground.

"Um, Uncle Luke," Anakin said, "would you mind very much if we went in through the hangar bay and took the turbolift?"

Luke raised his eyebrows at the unusual request. Tahiri giggled.

"I think we've all had enough stairs in the past few days to last us a long, long time," she said.

Book Six
Kenobi's Blade

Chapter One

In his room at the Jedi academy, Anakin Solo bent over a small worktable by the window slit. His ice blue eyes studied the project he was tinkering with. Although the thick stone walls of the Great Temple around him kept his room cool and dim, Anakin didn't mind. It was bright and hot outside today, and he needed the light low to see what he was doing. He found the dimness soothing. Having fewer distractions helped him to think. A fringe of straight dark hair fell across Anakin's eyes, as it often did, and he brushed the bangs aside so that he could see better.

"It's almost finished," he said.

On the windowsill, basking in the sun, a furry white creature with long floppy ears, a fluffy tail, and large blue-green eyes watched Anakin. The creature sat up to its full one-meter height and asked,

"Are you solving a puzzle?"

Anakin smiled. "Sort of. This is a programmable laser puzzle, and I'm trying to make a picture out of it—a hologram, really. I think I've just about got it." Anakin concentrated on blending

Rebecca Moesta

and focusing the laser beams into the pattern he had programmed for this light “painting.” Suddenly the hologram came together just as Anakin had planned, and he froze it into the puzzle’s memory.

“There. What do you think, Ikrit?”

Ikrit, the white-furred Jedi Master on the windowsill, nodded.

“Mmmmm. You show great skill for one so young.”

Anakin blushed slightly at the compliment. The red stain on his cheeks clashed with the orange of his comfortable flightsuit.

“I’m not *that* young,” he pointed out. “I’ll be a teenager next year.”

Just then a knock sounded at the door and, without waiting for an invitation, Anakin’s best friend danced into the room.

“Hi, Anakin. Good afternoon, Master Ikrit,” Tahiri sang.

She took a few twirling steps on her bare feet, and her long blonde hair swirled around the shoulders of her orange academy flightsuit. “Guess what?” she said. “Master Skywalker has been called away to Coruscant, so we won’t have any lessons with him for a couple of weeks.”

Anakin nodded and smiled to himself. He knew that his friend would probably keep talking whether he answered her or not.

“We’ll be having all our lessons with Tionne and Ikrit for the next week or two.”

Tahiri finally came to a spinning stop beside Anakin’s worktable. Her bright green eyes sparkled as she looked down at his project.

“That’s a great hologram of your family, Anakin,” she said in a wistful voice. “You’re lucky to have such a nice family. I always wonder what my parents were really like. I don’t remember much, except for what Sliven told me.”

Sliven was the leader of a tribe of Sand People on Tatooine. He had adopted Tahiri after her parents were killed when she was only a few years old. Tahiri kept talking, not even stopping to take a breath.

STAR WARS: Kenobi's Blade

"Isn't that a bolo generator? Where did you get it? And why aren't you in the hologram? I don't remember seeing it before. Did you have it made last time you were at home on Coruscant?" She paused for the briefest moment, and then continued. "So, aren't you going to say anything?"

Anakin shook his head. "I made this myself. I collected images of my family from everywhere I could find them, chose the best ones, and programmed them into this hologram. This one," he said, pointing to the image of Leia Organa Solo and Han Solo, "was from my last birthday. Mom left a meeting of the Senate to come to my party. To surprise her, Dad came back early from a trip to the Bepin System. I love that stunned and happy look on Mom's face."

He pointed to the images of his brother and sister, the Jedi twins.

"I added the pictures of Jacen and Jaina from shots taken here on Yavin 4 before they went home on break."

"Mmmmm. It is good to remember who your family is and what you are a part of," Ikrit said in his scratchy voice.

"I got the idea for it in Darth Vader's fortress," Anakin admitted.

"From the hologram he kept of your uncle Luke?" Tahiri asked.

"Yes. I like to think he kept it to remind himself of who he was. Maybe that's why-in the end, at least-he couldn't serve the dark side of the Force anymore," Anakin said.

"Sometimes I wish I had holograms of my parents," Tahiri said a little sadly. She put her hand up to touch the two pendants on the necklace she wore tucked inside her flightsuit; one held the thumbprints of her mother and father, the other held Sliven's.

"I do keep a little hologram of our instructor T'ionne, though," she went on. "That's the next best thing. After all, she's the one who found me on Tatooine when I lived with the Sand

Rebecca Moesta

People, and Tionne! Yipes, I almost forgot! You'll never guess in a million years."

Anakin didn't try to guess, but that didn't seem to faze Tahiri. Her face glowed with the excitement of her news.

"Tionne invited us to do something special because we helped her find Obi-Wan Kenobi's lightsaber and the Holocron in Bast Castle. She wants us all to come and watch while she explores the lessons in the Holocron! She said to come right away. We're supposed to bring Uldir, too."

Anakin looked at his wrist chronometer.

"In that case, we'd better hurry. You've been here several minutes already, and this sounds like something we don't want to miss."

Tahiri grinned. "It's almost like going on an adventure-except there won't be as many stairs as in Vader's fortress."

After stopping to collect Uldir from the kitchen, where he was working, the junior Jedi Knights and Ikrit trooped up to Tionne's chambers. They settled themselves in a loose semicircle around the Jedi instructor. Uldir wiped his hands off on the brown Jedi robe he wore and ran them through his shaggy chestnut hair. Tahiri noticed that he seemed more excited than any of them to be able to find out more about the Holocron.

That was good, Tahiri decided. Uldir's parents were cargo pilots for the New Republic. He had stowed away on a freighter and come to Yavin 4 in hopes of becoming a Jedi. Even though Master Skywalker had found no Jedi talent in the sturdy teenager, Uldir had stayed at the Jedi academy to study the Force.

Anakin, Tahiri, and Uldir had become good friends. But since they had all returned from Bast Castle-the fortress that had once belonged to Anakin's grandfather, Darth Vader-Uldir had been so withdrawn and quiet that Tahiri had been worried. Now that Uldir had found something to be excited about, Tahiri was glad. After all, *she* was excited, too. She always enjoyed taking lessons

with her teacher Tionne, of course, but this was something special.

"We will start at the beginning," Tionne said in hushed tones. The silvery-haired instructor's face dimpled into a smile as she sat down and held the gleaming milky cube lightly on one palm. She spoke in a musical voice and her enormous mother-of-pearl eyes seemed to shine.

"This is a Jedi Holocron. Each Holocron contains the recorded teachings of a Jedi Master, like a small library of knowledge. It passes on the Jedi Master's wisdom to future Jedi."

Tionne nodded to Ikrit, who dimmed the glow - panels for her. The teacher cupped her palms around the pearly cube. A glowing image sparkled to life in the air above it.

"Welcome, my children. How may I teach you today?" asked the hologram of Ash Krimsan, a tiny, plump woman with black hair. She wore a long, soft gown as red as wine.

"Please, tell us about yourself, Ash Krimsan," Tionne said. Tahiri shot her teacher a curious look. It seemed a bit odd to ask questions of a hologram.

Then, to her amazement, the hologram answered.

"I have spent the last two hundred years of my life teaching the very young," Ash Krimsan said. Her face beamed with kindness and wisdom that came from the Force.

"How could she hear our questions?" Tahiri whispered. "She's only a picture."

"When Jedi Masters record their Holocrons, they also program in answers to the 'questions they think will be asked most often,'" Ikrit whispered back. "That makes it easier to find information quickly."

The hologram paused for a moment, then continued.

"I believe that unless we teach future Jedi to use the Force when they are children, they may never reach the full talent they were meant to have. "

Uldir snorted. Out of the corner of her eye, Tahiri saw him clench his fists.

Rebecca Moesta

"Master Skywalker wasn't a child when *he* learned about the Force," he muttered, "and *he's* pretty powerful."

In the image, Ash Krimsan opened her hands and held them out as if offering a gift.

"That is why I have gathered all of my lessons and placed them into this Holocron for you, my children. These words are for you and for all Jedi who are to come. Teach your children well, and trust the Force. I will put this Holocron in one of the great Jedi libraries, so that future Jedi Masters may share what I have learned when they teach their students."

"Library?" the silver-haired Tionne said breathlessly.

Tahiri perked up. She had never heard of a great Jedi library.

"Can you tell me where it is?" Tionne asked.

With a sweep of the Jedi Master's arm, her image dissolved and a new one appeared. Robed figures with lightsabers at their sides walked through gleaming metal passages that curved away out of sight. Plasteel beams formed arches where corridors changed from one subject area to another. Large windowports framed triangles of multicolored transparisteel. Small alcoves filled with spot-lit artifacts dotted the walls. Crystalline data wafers filled row upon row of archive cases.

"The Jedi library," the voice of Ash Krimsan continued, "is on a space station in the Teedio System-Exis Station. The vast library there holds the collected knowledge of many, many Jedi."

"*Exis*," Tionne murmured. "I've seen it before."

Uldir jerked upright beside Tahiri. His amber eyes went wide.

"*Exis* Station? That's where the Mage Orloc said he was from."

The Jedi instructor's pearly eyes opened wide with surprise. She set down the Holocron, and the glowing picture of Ash Krimsan winked out. Anakin looked at Uldir.

"How do you know?" Uldir shrugged. "Orloc told me himself, when we were alone in the hangar bay in Vader's fortress." Tahiri remembered that when their group went to Vader's fortress on the planet Vjun to find Obi-Wan Kenobi's

lightsaber, a strange man in purple robes had gotten there ahead of them. After the companions found the lightsaber and the Jedi Holocron, the Mage Orloc had stolen them. In the race to recapture the treasures, Uldir had been the first to find the Mage-and had almost paid with his life. In the end, they got back both objects, but the Mage had escaped.

"You mean that magician guy lives in a space station that holds a Jedi library?" Tahiri said.

"Well, not really," Tionne answered. "I know that the library isn't there anymore. The space station has been empty for a long time now."

"You mean you *went* there already?" Tahiri asked. "Was it in one of your research trips?" She knew how much her teacher Tionne loved to study Jedi history. Every few months the silver-haired instructor went out on a trip to find anything she could about Jedi Knights who had lived long ago-stories, songs, tapestries, and so on.

"Yes," Tionne answered with a faraway look on her face. "It was many years ago. I heard that there was an ancient library in the Teedio System, so I looked for it. The legends said that a great Jedi meeting was held there once. I had hoped..." She shook her head. "When I got to the space station, I found it had been deserted for thousands of years. According to the station's records, a disaster had happened that made the sun in the Teedio System send out solar flares and heavy radiation. "The station was evacuated and the contents of the library were sent to Jedi throughout the galaxy for safekeeping. The flares lasted for so many years that no one ever returned to the station."

"Are there still flares?" Uldir asked.

"Every nine years or so the flares come again," Tionne said. "But there was no danger while I was at Exis. I decided that even though the library was empty, I had to save the station for what it once was. That was where Master Skywalker first found me. He was searching for new Jedi students at the time. I'm not sure

Rebecca Moesta

exactly how we did it, but the two of us started the space station's engines and moved it to a safe distance from the sun."

"All by yourselves?" Uldir asked, looking doubtful.

"Well, we did have the help of Artoo-Detoo and some old space station droids," Tionne said.

"I'd like to see it someday," Anakin said. "It sounds like a pretty interesting place, even if it's empty."

"It sure does," Tahiri said with a grin, "but I'm not ready for another adventure yet—at least, not if it means climbing more stairs."

"How about another lesson from the Holocron?" Uldir suggested.

Tionne frowned. "I'm not sure we should.... Ash Krimsan said that she made the Holocron to be used by Jedi Masters."

Uldir's shoulders sagged with disappointment.

"Well, what about Ikrit?" he said stubbornly, nodding at the furry Jedi Master across the circle.

"Mmmmm." Ikrit nodded. "The boy is correct: I *am* a Jedi Master." He spread his white-furred paws. "But Luke Skywalker is the master of the Jedi academy. I will leave it for him to decide how this historical treasure should be used."

Tionne looked relieved.

"That's settled then. We'll put the Holocron back in Master Skywalker's chambers until he returns."

She stood, picked up the glowing pearly cube, and left the room. Ikrit followed her.

Uldir's amber eyes grew stormy.

"It's not fair," he muttered. "We're the students. *We're* the ones who need those lessons. I'm ready to learn more right now."

Tahiri put a hand on his strong arm.

"There are lots of other ways to study until Master Skywalker gets back. After that, I'm sure we'll get plenty of chances to have lessons from the Holocron."

STAR WARS: Kenobi's Blade

"Uncle Luke should be back in a couple of weeks," Anakin added.

"Let's work on lighting candle flames-we can make a game out of it," Tahiri offered. She hoped she could distract the gruff teenager from his disappointment.

Uldir looked interested.

"Okay. That sounds better than trying to lift leaves. We've done that lots of times. I've never even gotten mine off the ground."

"But you're learning about the Force," Anakin pointed out. "That's important progress. It's one reason Uncle Luke lets you stay at the academy."

Uldir snorted.

"Progress? Maybe. It just seems like there ought to be a faster way."

Chapter Two

The stone hallways of the Jedi academy were dimly lit at night. A hush had fallen over the Great Temple hours ago. No sound could be heard but the distant buzzing of millions of jungle insects. Everyone was quiet, everyone peaceful. Except for Uldir. He couldn't sleep. Each time he closed his eyes, pictures from the Holocron flashed through his mind. The kindly old face of Jedi Master Ash Krimsan smiled at him.

Next came the images of Exis Station, which had once held a library of Jedi knowledge. Exis had been a magnificent space station. Uldir was sure that if he had studied there for a few months, back in the days when Ash Krimsan was a teacher, he would have become a powerful Jedi.

Uldir's thoughts raced. There was no hope of going to sleep now, so he decided to walk the cool halls. He met no one as he moved slowly through the shadows, almost invisible in his brown Jedi robe. Most of the students were already asleep or meditating in their rooms. Tionne had retired to her chambers right after evening meal. Even Ikrit was curled up asleep at the foot of

Anakin's bed when Uldir poked his head in to check on his friend. Feeling truly alone, Uldir heaved an unhappy sigh. Thoughts of his many failures in trying to learn about the Force nibbled away at his pride.

Uldir was sure now that Ash Krimsan was the key. If only he could study her lessons, he felt certain all of his problems would melt away. Unfortunately, he might never have a chance to learn the things that Ash Krimsan could teach him. So far, only Master Skywalker and Tionne could decide when to use the Holocron. But they didn't need the holographic lessons of a Jedi Master like Uldir did. It wasn't fair. Uldir wandered, paying no attention to where he walked. Soon he found himself at the end of a long passage. The hall on his right led back to the students' quarters. To his left, a stairway led upward. He was too restless to go back to his room, so he decided to take the stairs. Climbing the stone steps, Uldir felt a flash of irritation at Master Skywalker and Tionne.

They were holding back valuable knowledge from him. Didn't they *realize* how important the Holocron could be in Uldir's quest to become a Jedi Knight? Of course they realized it, Uldir reasoned. After all, he badly needed someone who could train him to do the tricks all Jedi Knights had to know. He needed a good teacher, and he needed the Holocron. He had tried to follow the slow, painstaking lessons that Tionne and Ikrit taught. He had listened to Master Skywalker's lectures. But the lessons seemed tedious. The information was too hard to use. Uldir was getting nowhere. Uldir came to the top of the stairs and headed down the first hallway he saw, still deep in thought.

He felt a sharp pang of self-doubt. Was he really sure anymore that he was capable of becoming a Jedi? After months of going to classes and practicing, he couldn't lift even a small leaf or feather with his mind. One time he thought he had come close, but he couldn't be sure. And, despite his best concentration and effort, he hadn't made a single spark when he tried to light a candle flame.

Rebecca Moesta

He knew he had to show some progress soon, or Master Skywalker wouldn't let him keep studying at the Jedi academy. It wouldn't have to be *much* progress, but at least a little. Could they be holding something back from him? Uldir passed thick stone walls and heavy wooden doors, but he hardly noticed. His thoughts became gloomier by the minute. What if he never got the right training to use the Force?

Without it, he'd never be a Jedi; he might as well just work in a kitchen for the rest of his life. Uldir groaned. If only he had more time to practice. If only he could take a lesson whenever he wanted. If only Tionne and Master Skywalker would let him use the Holocron. *Then* he might make some progress. In fact, the Holocron might be his only hope of ever becoming a Jedi now.

As he began to see the direction his thoughts and his steps had taken him, Uldir stopped still. That was it, of course: he had to have the Holocron! If he could just borrow it, he could learn everything he needed to know. Uldir looked around and realized that he was outside Master Skywalker's chambers. His feet must have known where to go even before his mind did. The Holocron was inside there—just waiting for him to use it. Before he could think any further, Uldir took a step toward the heavy door that led into Master Skywalker's chambers. His breathing became shallow, and his hands shook as he reached for the door latch.

A cold watery feeling, like a puddle of melting ice, formed at the pit of his stomach. *You can't just walk in there and take it*, his mind warned him. *That's stealing. Besides, what if someone sees you?* Suddenly frightened, Uldir backed away from the door and flattened himself against the opposite wall.

Now he was hidden in shadows. He would have time to reconsider. Was this really stealing? *Of course not*, Uldir told himself. *I'll just be borrowing it.* He decided he would give the Holocron back someday. But for now he needed it. It was his last chance to become a Jedi. Uldir darted a look up and down the corridor, but there was no sound, no movement.

STAR WARS: Kenobi's Blade

Master Skywalker was gone, he remembered. Nobody would be inside the teacher's room. If he wanted the Holocron, he'd have to take it now-there would be no better time. And once Uldir had studied the Holocron and become a Jedi, everyone would agree that he'd had to do this. It was the only way. Uldir tried to screw up his courage. He would have to act quickly. But despite all his reasons, he was very nervous. Did he truly dare to break in and steal from the greatest Jedi Master in the galaxy? Uldir took a deep breath to steady himself.

There's always a price to pay if you want to be a Jedi, he reminded himself. He took another deep breath. Then, glancing all around again to be sure he was completely alone, he tiptoed forward. His heart pounded and he felt sweat prickle on his forehead. When he reached the door, he tried the latch. It was open. For some reason, this made him even more nervous, and the latch slid out of his fingers with a sharp click. It took him two more tries before his trembling hands could hold on to the latch long enough to pull the door open.

By the time Uldir slipped inside and quietly shut the door behind him, his legs were shaking so badly that he had to lean back against the door for support. Inside, the room was even darker and quieter than the hallway had been. Strangely shaped shadows crisscrossed in the air and made strange patterns on the flagstones at his feet. Uldir wondered - a bit late-if Master Skywalker had some sort of intruder alarm to guard his room. But Uldir heard no shouts of warning, no footsteps running through the halls. Like a blind man, Uldir held his hands out in front of him and moved forward, feeling his way along one wall.

He didn't dare turn on the glow - panels for fear of the light being seen through the window or under the door. Something brushed against his face, light as an insect's wing. Uldir just barely kept himself from crying out. The thing was still there brushing against him, so he jumped back and flailed at it with both hands, hoping to chase the creature away. A moment later he held the thing in his hands-a robe.

Rebecca Moesta

The “creature” he had feared was nothing more than one of Master Skywalker’s Jedi robes hanging from a peg on the wall!

“Get a grip on yourself, Uldir,” he muttered. “Jedi aren’t supposed to get spooked that easily. A Jedi uses all the knowledge in his possession. You know what this room looks like, so stop acting like a baby gundark in a glass-blower’s shop.”

Shaking his head to clear it, Uldir hung the robe on its peg again. Next, he turned his back to the wall and headed toward the corner where he knew Master Skywalker’s worktable stood. He guessed that was where Tionne would have put the Holocron objects while waiting for Master Skywalker to return. His legs bumped against the table when he reached it. Something thumped, rolled, then fell to the floor with a loud clatter. Uldir stood paralyzed for a moment, wondering if anyone had heard. That was silly, of course. No one outside the room could have heard the sound, any more than they could have heard the furious hammering of his heart.

He bent to retrieve the object. It was heavy and shaped like a tube, with ridges along its metal surface.

A lightsaber.

It must be the weapon that had once belonged to Obi-Wan Kenobi. Uldir turned the handle so that the blade would point away from him and pressed a smooth button on the handle. Almost immediately, the bright, blue-white blade sprang to life with a *whoosh*.

By the pulsing light of the energy sword, Uldir saw the treasure he had come for: the Holocron.

He reached a shaky finger out to touch the pearly, cube-shaped object. Nothing happened. Picking up the Holocron with his free hand, he held it high and waited for it to speak to him. Again, nothing happened. Why didn’t it turn on?

The thing had always turned on as soon as Tionne wanted it to. There were no buttons to press, no switches to throw. What, then, was the secret? Uldir closed his eyes and concentrated. *Turn on*, he told it.

No hologram appeared.

He tried whispering the words out loud, but with no better effect. A knot tied itself in his throat and he swallowed hard.

"Let me speak to Ash Krimsan," he hissed. The Holocron remained stubbornly silent. Then a thought occurred to Uldir. Perhaps the Holocron responded only to a full-fledged Jedi or someone who knew its secret. In fact, the Mage Orloc himself had claimed to know the secret of the Holocron and had offered to teach him. It certainly made sense that if the Mage lived at Exis Station—a place that had once held a great Jedi library—he would know how to operate the Holocron.

Then Uldir remembered the *Sunrider*, the ancient ship that belonged to Master Ikrit. The ship still stood out on the landing field.... Did he dare?

"No guts, no glory," Uldir reminded himself in a fierce whisper. Yes, he decided: he dared. He still wanted to be a Jedi, and he had come this far. He would just have to go to Orloc and ask the Mage to teach him. With that decision made, he switched off the lightsaber. He tucked it and the Holocron into the folds of his brown Jedi robe and crept quietly out of Master Skywalker's quarters.

Chapter Three

Tahiri loved the feel of the Great Temple's smooth, cool stones beneath her bare feet. She hummed a soft tune under her breath while she walked up and down the halls, but her mind was set on just one thing: finding Uldir. The teenager was already more than an hour late for a practice session he and Tahiri had planned this morning. It wasn't like her friend to be late. Anakin had gone for an early walk in the jungle with Master Ikrit.

They wouldn't be back until time for the midmorning lesson, so Tahiri decided to look for Uldir alone. She started with the kitchens. When she stuck her head in to look around, the food-prep area was bustling with activity. The scents of baking bread, stewing meats and vegetables, and freshly sliced fruits filled the air. Half a dozen cooks, servers, and cleaning people scurried about doing their chores, but Tahiri saw no sign of Uldir's shaggy chestnut hair or broad shoulders. In fact, the kitchen staff said that Uldir had not been in all morning. Tahiri shook her head and yanked thoughtfully at a strand of blonde hair.

This was not like Uldir *at all*. Next she tried the Grand Audience Chamber, where Uldir sometimes went to think. But this morning the huge auditorium stood completely empty. Tahiri looked in every one of Uldir's favorite places, both inside the Great Temple and out. She even searched on the landing field and noticed that Ikrit's ship, the *Sunrider*, was gone. The white-furred Jedi Master must have changed his mind and taken Anakin for a short flight instead of a walk, she guessed. Tahiri headed back inside. She was beginning to get worried about her friend. After checking the docking bay, the rear steps of the temple, and the Comm Center, her worry turned to alarm.

Then, like a blaster bolt, it struck her—she hadn't actually *looked* inside his room! She had only knocked once, and given up when there had been no reply. Of course, if Uldir *was* still in his room and hadn't answered her knock, that probably meant he was sick or upset over something. Still, she was relieved. She began humming her little tune again as she hurried toward his quarters as fast as her bare feet could carry her. At the door to her friend's room, Tahiri raised a small, strong hand and rapped sharply on the thick wood.

"Uldir, it's me," she sang out. "Can I talk to you?" When there was no reply, she tried again. "Uldir, are you all right? May I come in?"

Again, no answer. Tahiri sensed nothing from behind the door.

Nothing at all. What if her friend was really sick or unconscious? She would have to look. Carefully she eased the door open a crack and peeked in. The sleeping pallet in the corner was empty.

Pushing the door open so that she could step inside, Tahiri called, "Uldir?"

The room was empty. Completely empty. Not a trace of her friend. She even checked the refresher unit, but the door stood open and the cubicle was empty. Something was very wrong here. A feeling of dread clamped itself around Tahiri's chest,

Rebecca Moesta

making it hard for her to breathe. In the little trunk where Uldir kept his few possessions, Tahiri found nothing. She whirled and looked at the wall. No flightsuit or Jedi robes dangled from the pegs there.

Uldir was *gone*. But where?

Anakin always enjoyed walks with Ikrit. Now that they were back, the white-furred Jedi Master sat on the windowsill sunning himself while Anakin got ready for his morning lesson. Artoo-Detoo stood in the corner nearby; the little droid always stayed close to Anakin when Master Skywalker was gone. Anakin had just finished pulling on a fresh flightsuit when Tahiri burst into the room. Pale yellow hair damp with sweat clung to her forehead. Her emerald green eyes blazed like they always did when she had something important to tell him.

"Uldir's not here!" Tahiri blurted out. "I can't find him anywhere. I looked all over the Great Temple while you and Master Ikrit were flying around in the *Sunrider*. No one has seen him all morning, and his room is empty. Well, aren't you going to say anything?" She rushed on before Anakin could grasp what she was telling him. "Even his clothes are gone, and his blanket. Everything. There's nothing at--"

"Wait a minute," Anakin said, trying hard to let his mind catch up with Tahiri's words. "Who told you that Master Ikrit and I were in the *Sunrider*? We went for a walk this morning."

"Well, one of the places I looked for Uldir was on the landing field, and when I noticed that the *Sunrider* was gone, I naturally figured that you and Master Ikrit were..." Her words trailed off.

Anakin shook his head. Ikrit spoke up from the windowsill.

"Mmmmmm, the girl is right. My ship no longer stands on the landing field."

Artoo-Detoo gave an astonished - sounding twitter.

"I've got a strange feeling about this," Anakin said.

Just then, their teacher Tionne appeared in the doorway. A worried frown drew her silvery brows together and creased her

forehead. When she saw her two students with the Jedi Master, her face cleared.

"Oh, *there* you are. Did you borrow the Holocron, Master Ikrit? I wanted to ask it something before our morning lesson. But when I went to get it from Master Skywalker's room, the table where I had put it and Obi-Wan Kenobi's lightsaber was empty."

Anakin had been with Ikrit all morning and knew that the Jedi Master did not have the Holocron. When Anakin saw Ikrit's fluffy white ears droop, a dozen puzzle pieces fell into place in his mind.

"I'm afraid I know where the Holocron is," Anakin said heavily. "And Obi-Wan Kenobi's light - saber, too. I think they're in the *Sunrider*."

He glanced up at Tahiri and watched his friend's green eyes go wide with shock as she realized what he meant. His teacher Tionne, however, looked confused.

"Why? Who put them in Master Ikrit's ship?"

Ikrit sprang down from the windowsill.

"We must go after the boy," the white-furred Jedi said, as if the question had already been answered. "The Holocron is valuable. Although only a Jedi can use it, the boy could be in more danger than he suspects."

"Who?" Tionne asked again. "Why is the Holocron in the *Sunrider*?"

Anakin looked at the Jedi teacher.

"Uldir is gone," he said. "Tahiri looked and his rooms are empty."

"No one has seen him since last night," Tahiri put in.

"The *Sunrider* is also missing," Ikrit added.

Tionne closed her mother-of-pearl eyes and nodded her understanding.

"And now the Holocron and Obi-Wan Kenobi's lightsaber are missing, too. I see." She opened her eyes again, and her face

Rebecca Moesta

held a look of determination. “You’re right, Master Ikrit. We’ll have to go after Uldir. There’s no time to lose.”

“I think I know where Uldir might be headed.” Anakin brushed the fringe of dark hair away from his eyes. Another piece of the puzzle had just clicked into place. “Exis,” he said. “The space station. He probably thinks that’s the best place to learn to be a Jedi.”

“And he said that Mage Orloc talked about Exis Station too,” Tahiri reminded him.

“Can you fly us to Exis in the *Lore Seeker*?” Ikrit asked Tionne.

“Yes,” Tionne said. “I remember how to get there. I can program the coordinates into the *Lore Seeker*’s navigational computers.”

Artoo-Detoo warbled and bleeped.

“Of *course* we’ll take you along as our navigator, Artoo,” Anakin said.

“I’m sure Master Skywalker would approve,” Tionne agreed.

“What if Uldir just left for a little while? Maybe he’ll come back by himself,” Tahiri suggested.

“All right. Gather everything you’ll need for our trip,” Tionne answered. “I’ll have the Great Temple searched again. But if the *Sunrider* and Uldir aren’t here by this evening, we leave for Exis Station.”

Chapter Four

Alone at the controls of the ship, Uldir reached up and flipped a few switches overhead. The *Sunrider* shuddered and dropped out of hyperspace at the edge of the Teedio System. Uldir gave a whoop of triumph. He had made it. He was almost there. For a few minutes at the beginning of his trip, Uldir had wondered if he would truly be able to navigate and pilot the *Sunrider* all by himself, but he was a good pilot and he had succeeded. Uldir knew from what Ash Krimsan and Tionne had said that the space station was somewhere in the Teedio System at a safe distance from the sun. The coordinates for the system had been easy to find in the *Sunrider*'s navicomputer. Now that he had arrived, he'd have to scan for the station itself. But something that large, he figured, should be simple enough to locate.

"Way to go, hotshot," he congratulated himself, proud of a job well done. "I'll bet you could fly just about *any* ship if you had to." His parents, who were shuttle pilots for the New

Rebecca Moesta

Republic, had taught him well. He checked his coordinates and began a survey of the Teedio System, searching for Exis Station.

Within minutes a blip appeared on the control panel in front of him. The thing was too big to be another ship, Uldir decided. The blip was the right size, shape, and age, and it was just about where Tionne said she had left the space station. Uldir grinned and laid in a new course straight to the station. The distant stars seemed to hold a welcoming twinkle, and Uldir told himself that he was definitely doing the right thing.

Or was he? Flying the *Sunrider* alone had been such a challenge that Uldir had not let himself think about what he had done up to this point. Now that he was finally close to his destination, though, doubts crept into his mind. Had the dark side of the Force brought him here?

After all, he had stolen the ship and the Holocron and the light - saber-no, he had *borrowed* them, Uldir corrected himself. A new thought sent a jolt of fear through him.

What if Orloc no longer lived at Exis? Or what if he did, but refused to help Uldir? Uldir set his mouth in a grim line. Well then, he would just stay at the space station without the Mage and study until he became a Jedi. Perhaps in this place that had once held a great library of the Jedi, the Holocron would work for Uldir. He would learn its secrets and return to his friends a full-fledged Jedi.

He would show them that he could make something of himself. But what if he *was* just falling to the dark side of the Force by coming here?

Uldir snorted. Sometimes a Jedi had to make difficult decisions, he assured himself. What choices did he have left, after all? Master Skywalker had said he saw no Jedi potential in Uldir. And outside the cave on Dathomir, the furball Ikrit had said there was nothing there for Uldir, for whom the cave had seemed empty.

Tahiri and Anakin had claimed to have strange experiences in the cave, and Uldir now believed them. What Uldir did *not*

believe was that these “failures” meant he could never become a Jedi. They simply meant that traditional teaching didn’t work for him. Well, he had seen another chance and he had taken it. He’d soon find out if the risk had been worth it. He allowed himself a small smile. At least this time he wasn’t a stowaway.

Uldir sat up straighter in the pilot’s seat as he caught his first good glimpse of Exis. It looked like a many-armed sea creature made of metal, turning slowly in space. It was much larger than he had expected. The center of the space station was shaped like a thick, solid wheel. Satellite stations of all shapes and sizes were connected to the central hub by wide access tubes. He couldn’t tell what the smaller stations were for, but he would ignore them, he decided, and head straight for the hub. Now came one of the trickier parts of his plan.

He couldn’t be sure whether anyone was there on the space station monitoring the docking bays. However, most space stations had at least one fully automated emergency dock for use only by captains of damaged ships or travelers who were injured or ill. Taking a deep breath and holding it, Uldir sent the age-old signal that identified him as a ship in distress. For a long moment nothing happened.

Uldir’s stomach churned, and still he held his breath. He gritted his teeth. What if he had guessed wrong? What if he had come all this way and there was no way to get aboard Exis Station? Suddenly an guessed wrong? What if he had come all this way and there was no way to get aboard Exis Station?

Suddenly an opening appeared in the side of the space station as a wide bay door slid aside. Rippling rows of bright lights appeared in the hangar bay walls to guide Uldir’s ship into position. Letting out his breath in a sigh of relief, Uldir took the *Sunrider* in for a landing.

.....

Except for the usual clanks, hums, buzzes, and thumps made by a working space station, Uldir was greeted by silence when he

Rebecca Moesta

stepped out into the sealed hangar bay. There was plenty of breathable air in the station-he had checked before leaving the ship. Uldir clipped Obi-Wan Kenobi's lightsaber to the belt he wore around his Jedi robe. He stuffed the Holocron into a full supply satchel and slung the strap over his shoulder. He looked around and snorted.

"Not much of a welcoming committee," he muttered. Then he remembered that emergency docks were normally sealed off from the rest of the space station, in case the "emergency" happened to be a transport filled with spies or a ship about to explode. Even if Orloc was somewhere on Exis, he probably didn't know of Uldir's arrival.

It was dark inside-not as dark as space itself, but dark enough to make Uldir shiver. Once the hangar bay doors had automatically shut, the lights had dimmed again, so Uldir rummaged through his satchel and pulled out a glowrod. Turning it to its brightest setting, he raised the light high and looked around. Exis Station's emergency hangar bay was enormous, able to hold much larger ships than Ikrit's little *Sunrider*. The light from the glowrod didn't even reach the ceiling. Shadows sucked away at the edges of his light.

"Spooky old place," Uldir mumbled.

He jumped at the sudden hissing and ticking sound that came from behind him, but it was only the *Sunrider*'s engines cooling. He laughed at himself. He hadn't realized how tense this new situation had made him. Holding the glowrod with shaking fingers, he headed toward the back of the docking bay until his light fell on a sealed airlock door. Uldir walked the length of the wall once, but the airlock door was the only exit. Sealed with blast-shielding, the door was only large enough to accommodate one person at a time-probably as a security precaution.

Any intruders who tried to attack the space station from this emergency hangar bay would have to do so one by one. Not knowing what to expect, Uldir reached for the airlock control switch. To his surprise, the airlock door slid open at his touch. It

was unlocked and required no access code. Uldir stepped into the airlock with a smile of satisfaction and let the door slide shut. Next he threw the switch for the second door. When it slid open, his mouth fell open too. Waiting for him on the other side was one of the strangest sights Uldir had ever seen.

About a dozen droids of every shape and description stood, sat, trundled, or hovered in a rough semicircle outside the airlock. In front of the droids crouched a handful of large rodentlike creatures with gray-brown fur. The creatures, who wore purple sashes around their waists and silver armbands, would have been about as tall as his shoulder had they been standing. Uldir knew what they were, for he had seen some once on Tatooine: they were Ranats.

And each of them was holding a blaster - pointed straight at him.

He froze. Before Uldir could even speak, someone or something threw a rough sack over his head and pushed him to the floor. Tiny fingers with sharp claws tied his hands and feet together. Uldir thought of calling for help, but he knew there was no one to call to. When he tried to speak, he felt a sharp sting, as if a needle had pricked his arm. Then came a fizzy feeling, like he sometimes had when his foot fell asleep... only this was all over his body.

Then the darkness inside the sack turned even darker, and Uldir passed out.

Uldir didn't know how long he was unconscious, but when he woke up he found himself on something hard and flat that was moving. Probably a stretcher or a repulsorsled, he guessed. He heard the voices of the Ranats chittering around him. They were not speaking Basic, so he couldn't understand what they were saying.

The sled hummed and rocked softly as they moved along. Minutes crept by and became half an hour, then an hour. Uldir stopped trying to keep track of the time. His arms and legs still

Rebecca Moesta

had that fizzy feeling. Perhaps this time they were truly asleep. At last, after what might have been hours, the Ranats and the clanking droids and the repulsor - sled came to a stop. The platform Uldir lay on stopped humming, as if someone had flicked a switch, and he fell half a meter to land painfully on the floor.

He struggled back up into a sitting position. Someone yanked the sack off his head. Uldir blinked in the sudden brightness of a clean, well-lit room. The walls and floors were of polished metal, and plush cushions lay scattered on the deckplates. Suddenly a plume of smoke billowed up from amongst the cushions and Uldir heard a voice say, "Why, I do believe we have a visitor."

When the smoke cleared, Uldir saw a thin man wearing a deep purple cloak with silver spangles along its edges. The man threw back the hood of his cloak to reveal long dark hair, tawny eyes, and a small, neat beard. But Uldir already knew who he was. It was the Mage Orloc.

Chapter Five

With afternoon sunlight glinting off its copper - colored hull and its solar sails spread like dragon wings on either side, the *Lore Seeker* lifted off from Yavin 4. Tahiri stared straight forward at the space between Tionne in the pilot's seat and Artoo-Detoo at the copilot's station. Ikrit was perched on the droid's head.

"Next stop, Exis Station," Tionne said glancing over her shoulder.

Artoo-Detoo twittered a response. Tahiri wasn't really looking through the front viewport, though. In fact, she wasn't looking at anything. She was thinking. Her green eyes were unfocused, and she tugged repeatedly at a strand of her blonde hair. Beside her, Anakin leaned over to whisper,

"Are you okay?" Tahiri still looked straight ahead. She nodded, then stopped and shook her head. She spoke in a halting voice.

"While... while we were looking for Uldir, and then when we were getting ready for our trip, I didn't let myself think about him...."

Rebecca Moesta

"But now you're thinking?" Anakin said.

She nodded.

"Me too," he admitted.

In the viewport ahead, the blackness of space deepened and pinprick stars appeared.

"I've got a strange feeling about this. I can't decide whether I'm really angry at Uldir or just worried about him," Anakin said. Tahiri blinked and turned to look into Anakin's ice blue eyes.

"Strange," she said, "I was trying to decide if I felt more guilty or betrayed."

Ikrit's scratchy voice drifted back from the front of the cockpit.

"Our course is verified."

Artoo-Detoo beeped once to show that he agreed.

"Switching to hyperdrive," Tionne replied.

Out of the corner of her eye Tahiri saw the specks of stars stretch into long white lines around the *Lore Seeker* as it jumped to hyperspace.

"Why?" Anakin asked. "Why should *you* feel guilty?"

Tahiri shrugged and wriggled uncomfortably in her crash webbing. Suddenly the ship seemed too quiet. There was no sound except for the low humming of the hyperdrive engines.

"I feel guilty because I should have been a better friend to Uldir," Tahiri said. "Maybe if I'd spent more time encouraging him and practicing with him, he wouldn't have done this."

"But we did help him," Anakin pointed out.

"If it hadn't been for us, I don't think Uncle Luke would have let Uldir stay at the Jedi academy," Tahiri sighed.

"Probably not. But if he hadn't stayed, at least the Holocron and Obi-Wan Kenobi's lightsaber wouldn't be missing. How could Uldir *do* something like that?" Anakin's cheeks turned pink, as if he were ashamed. "I don't know. I thought he was our friend. We fought for him and practiced with him, but I guess he didn't really trust us. Maybe it wasn't enough that we tried to be his friends."

"What else should we have done for him?" Tahiri asked, feeling despair fill her. Artoo-Detoo swiveled his head and whistled twice, the little droid's signal for no.

"Artoo is right," Tionne said. "You can't blame yourselves. We can never know exactly why Uldir left, but the reason probably made sense to *him*. To understand why people do the things that they do, we need to learn to see things through their eyes. One thing I'm certain of, though: Uldir is old enough to know right from wrong."

"Yes, the boy made his own choice," Ikrit agreed.

"You must let him bear the responsibility for his own actions." Tahiri noticed that the Jedi Master's downy fur had a grayish tinge, as it sometimes did when he was upset. "Are you angry with Uldir for stealing the *Sunrider*?" she asked.

Ikrit cocked his head to one side and wheezed several times. With surprise, Tahiri recognized the sound as the Jedi Master's laugh.

"The ship is a fine one," he said. "But it is, after all, only a ship. I do not care about it as I do for some other machines." Here Ikrit patted Artoo's domed head beneath him, and the little droid whistled softly. "Nor do I care as much about my ship as I do about all of you. Or about the boy. Even so, our young friend must accept the consequences for his own mistakes and learn to make them right. That is not for us to do."

"But Uldir could be in danger," Anakin said.

"And we are his friends," Tahiri added.

"If he's in danger, we can't just leave him to face it alone."

Tionne turned her silvery head to look at her students. "Of course not," she said firmly. "We won't leave Uldir out there alone."

No matter what their real reason was for being aboard the *Lore Seeker*, Anakin had to admit it was a fascinating ship. He and Tahiri amused themselves in the central crew cabin for a few hours as the ship sped toward Exis Station. Tionne had stocked

Rebecca Moesta

the *Lore Seeker* with a hololibrary and decorated it with antique objects from a hundred different planets.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” Tahiri asked. She held up a petrified kor egg decorated with Bith story carvings.

Anakin looked at the glossy egg his friend held.

“It sure is. The *Lore Seeker* may be too small to qualify as a museum, but it certainly comes close,” he said. “We even get to handle the stuff that’s on display, if we want to.”

“The best part is,” Tahiri added, her green eyes twinkling, “that Tionne *likes* it when we ask questions about her treasures.”

“What questions?” Tionne asked, emerging from the cockpit with Ikrit behind her.

Anakin grinned. “Oh, questions like, ‘What are those?’” He pointed past her into the cockpit at a pair of fluffy objects that dangled from the ceiling just above Artoo-Detoo’s head.

“Oh, those? Those are Arkudan gaming cubes. They’re supposed to bring luck, but I just keep them because they’re centuries old, and I like the way they look. Do you have other questions?”

“Sure. What does Exis Station look like?” Tahiri asked. “On the outside, I mean. We saw it on the inside when we watched Ash Krimsan talking about it in the Holocron. Well, I doubt that it still looks *exactly* like that, since the Holocron was recorded so long ago. Still, it was enough to give us an idea of what it’s like, but it really didn’t show us the size of the station or how it’s shaped. So I’d like to know a bit more before we get there.” Tahiri finally stopped for a breath. “Well, aren’t you going to say anything?”

The silvery-haired Jedi instructor laughed a musical laugh. She went to a panel on the wall and chose a recording from the holo library.

“I think I’ll let this holo clip speak for itself,” she said.

The lights in the cabin dimmed and a hologram flickered and then came into focus in the center of the room. Anakin was

entranced. The hologram of Exis Station hung in midair at about waist level, making it easy for him to study.

“Kind of weird, huh?” Tahiri said.

Access tubes spread out like the rays of a star from a solid center hub, connecting it to satellite stations of all shapes and sizes. Anakin guessed that these smaller satellites must have been added as an afterthought to expand the original station, since no two of them were the same shape or color. In the hologram, Exis spun slowly in the air, reminding Anakin of a Randoni carousel he had once ridden on Coruscant.

“Definitely strange,” Anakin agreed.

“We’ll dock over here,” Tionne said, pointing to a bay on the edge of the central hub. “Last time we were there your uncle Luke and I programmed a couple of the docking bays to respond only to our signal. That bay is the closest one to Exis Station’s main control center.”

“It is a good place to begin,” Tionne said.

“But begin,” Master Ikrit said.

“Once we *get* there it will be a good place to begin,” Tionne said. “But for now, I think we’d all better begin with some sleep. If there’s danger waiting for us on Exis, I’ll need you all as alert as possible.”

Chapter Six

Uldir wondered if he had made a mistake. Now that he'd found the Mage, he felt more nervous than he had at any time since he had decided on his bold plan of borrowing the Holocron. The Mage Orloc tilted his head back, looked down his sharp nose at Uldir, and pointed a slender finger at him.

"Give me one good reason why I shouldn't drop you down the recycling chute with the rest of my garbage."

"I-well, I...", Uldir stammered.

This was the moment he'd been waiting for, he reminded himself. He was planning to become a Jedi, and Jedi must be bold. Uldir squared his shoulders and lifted his chin.

"I've brought you the Holocron you wanted, and the lightsaber of Obi-Wan Kenobi. They are yours-if your offer to train me still stands."

The Mage's tawny eyes blinked rapidly several times, as if Uldir's courage had surprised him. Then his face took on a shrewd, suspicious look.

"Why, this is a trap, isn't it? Your friends at the Jedi academy were probably worried that I'd return to steal their treasures, so you decided to lure me into the open." Orloc's lips twisted in a sneer. "Why, of course. I see it now. You arrive with the bait, and then your friends swoop in to capture the Great Mage of Exis Station. Hah! Do you think me a fool? Tell me, when do your friends arrive?"

Uldir was confused. As far as he knew, no one at the Jedi academy had given any thought to Orloc since Uldir and his friends had returned from Bast Castle. Did this magician *really* believe he was so important that the Jedi academy would risk two great treasures in a complicated plot to capture him?

"There's no trap," Uldir said simply.

The purple-robed Mage growled. Two Ranats in purple sashes moved to his side, raising their blasters to point at Uldir.

"Why should I believe you?" Orloc asked.

"Coming here was my idea. I'm old enough to make my own decisions. No one is following me," Uldir said. He tried to sound bold, though his voice changed with an embarrassing squeak as he spoke. "They don't even know where I went."

Orloc's tawny eyes narrowed.

"You'd better not be lying," he warned. "I feel it only fair to tell you that I've reprogrammed all of the droids on this station to obey only my orders." The Mage paused for emphasis, then lowered his voice to a threatening growl. "Some of them are assassin droids."

He motioned to a droid behind Uldir. It trundled forward, pressed a probe into his back, and gave him a brief electrical shock.

"I'm telling the truth-I came here alone!" Uldir gasped in helpless frustration, still smarting from the shock the droid had delivered. "I've been studying at the Jedi academy for months," he rushed on, "but Master Skywalker doesn't believe I've got any talent in the Force. Their way of teaching just isn't working. After all this time, I can't even light a spark or budge a speck of

Rebecca Moesta

dust. Back in Bast Castle you said you could help me, so I came here to study with you.”

The Mage motioned for the two Ranats to put down their blasters. His eyes narrowed shrewdly.

“Why, you want *real* power, don’t you?”

Uldir nodded.

“Power like mine.”

Uldir nodded again, afraid his voice would break if he tried to speak.

“Very well, then. I will accept the Holocron and the lightsaber from you as a token of your respect for your new teacher.” He snapped his fingers and a purple-sashed Ranat scurried forward and held its tiny clawed hands open.

Uldir reluctantly surrendered the Jedi treasures to the Ranat, who scampered over and delivered them to Orloc. The Mage stretched out his arms, the Holocron in one hand, Obi-Wan Kenobi’s lightsaber in the other. He stamped his foot and the glowpanels in the room flickered like lightning.

“Behold,” Orloc said, raising the Holocron high in front of him. The entire room went dark.

Uldir expected at any moment to see Ash Krimsan’s kindly wrinkled face and to hear her say, “Welcome, my children. What may I teach you today?”

But no hologram blossomed in the air above Orloc’s hand. Orloc blinked furiously in the dimness.

“Why, it’s ridiculous to begin with these lessons,” he said. “I have so many things to teach you first that you could never learn from some old Jedi.”

The Mage gave a careless laugh.

“Why, you haven’t learned anything yet from all that Jedi teaching, have you? You must let me teach you myself. Ask me anything, my student. Where shall we begin?”

Uldir was excited. *Now* he would have the chance to learn. He would become a great Jedi.

"Well, I could never even use the Force to turn on a light," he admitted with a sigh.

The Mage chuckled, not unkindly. "Why, there's nothing simpler, my boy," he said striding over to stand beside Uldir. "Just for a moment, clear all thoughts from your mind. Don't concentrate on anything at all. Not words, not pictures; no commands, no requests. Now, leave your mind open and think of light. It only takes an instant."

Uldir swept all conscious thought from his mind, leaving it blank and open. A split second later all of the room's glowpanels flashed and returned to their full brightness. He was amazed. Just as he had always suspected, it *had* been simple to use the Force—so simple that Uldir wondered why he hadn't been able to do it before. Well, he *could* do it now. This was real progress, he thought. Soon he would be a Jedi.

The Mage tossed the Holocron high into the air and easily caught it with one hand. Then he tucked it deep into the folds of his purple robe.

"You see? You came to the right place after all," Orloc said with a smug grin. "And that, my boy, is only the beginning."

Chapter Seven

Big didn't even begin to describe it. *Huge..... colossal... enormous... gigantic*. Anakin thought through all of the words in his vocabulary, but none seemed quite clear enough to express his first impression of Exis Station. Beside him Tahiri whispered,

"Great Bantha!" 'Bonne's musical laugh filled the cockpit. "It's quite a sight the first time, isn't it? Second time, too, come to think of it."

Artoo-Detoo bleeped once to show that he agreed.

"Mmmmmm. Most impressive," Ikrit wheezed.

Anakin was still trying to absorb what he was seeing. Exis looked like its own little solar system, with seven satellites orbiting a slightly flattened pewter-colored sun.

"Each part is so different," Anakin mused aloud.

He was already trying to figure out how each piece of the space station's puzzle fit in and what purpose it served.

"That's because the satellites were added one by one as the need arose," Tionne said.

"But why did they build the satellites?" Tahiri asked. "Did they need more room?"

Tionne piloted the ship in closer to the huge space station.

"In the beginning there was only the central hub, which held the libraries, the docking bays, and all of the living quarters. One company sent miners to live on Exis and mine gases from the nearby star. As more and more beings from across the galaxy arrived to visit Exis, mine star gas, or study there, satellites were built on to provide living areas for different species. See that one there?" The instructor pointed to a satellite that looked like a shallow soup bowl with a domed lid. "That one was filled with water for undersea dwellers."

"What about that one?" Anakin asked, indicating a rectangular satellite with rounded corners. It was a murky yellow color and several hundred meters long.

"From what I remember," Tionne said, "that one was filled with a chlorine-rich atmosphere for chlorine breathers. And that next satellite, the oval one, was built for visitors who needed a place with high gravity."

Artoo-Detoo warbled and trilled. Tionne looked down at the control console in front of her.

"It's all right, Artoo, I've got it," she said. "We're headed for Docking Bay 17. I'll transmit the code myself."

Soon the central pewter-colored hub loomed so close and large in the front viewports that it was impossible to see the satellites or the arms that connected them to the space station-or even the stars, for that matter. Only the hull of the central hub was visible now.

Tahiri leaned over to Anakin.

"It gives me kind of a shivery feeling just looking at it," she confided. "If you feel that way now," the silver-haired Jedi instructor said, "just wait till we get inside."

"Mmmmmm," Ikrit said in his scratchy voice. "We must be cautious. We cannot be certain what dangers may wait for us inside."

Rebecca Moesta

Directly ahead of them, Hangar Bay 17 yawned open. Landing lights rippled to guide them in. Tionne retracted the *Lore Seeker's* solar sail “wings” as they entered the cavernous bay. Anakin was amazed at the size of the hangar. It could have held a dozen ships the size of the *Lore Seeker* and still had room to spare. Tionne brought the ship down in the center of the main landing pad. The hangar bay door sealed itself behind them, and the interior landing lights went dark. The companions gathered their packs of supplies while Tionne finished her shutdown of the *Lore Seeker*. Before they ventured forth, Artoo assured them that there was now sufficient air in the hangar bay for them to breathe.

When they all stood outside the *Lore Seeker* in the fitful light that flickered from glowpanels far overhead, Tahiri finally said what Anakin had been thinking.

“I hate to mention this, but this is a huge station. How can we hope to find Uldir with so many places to look?”

Tionne smiled reassuringly. “This station was where I first met Master Skywalker. He found *me*, even though I was the only other person on all of Exis Station.”

“Was he looking for you?” Anakin asked.

“Not exactly,” the Jedi instructor replied. “He didn’t even know I was here at first, but he sensed me through the Force.”

Anakin felt a tingling up the back of his neck. “Still,” he said, “even with the Force, it could take days to find anyone in this place.”

“Then I guess we’d better get started,” Tionne observed. “The exit to this docking bay is up here.” She climbed a short flight of stairs to a raised metal mesh walkway.

The dim, flickering lights made it difficult to see, and Anakin stumbled when he tried to follow her. He fell to one knee and then cried out in surprise as something brushed against his face. Artoo-Detoo gave a shrill whistle of alarm.

“It’s all right,” Anakin said, putting a hand to his face, “it was only cobwebs.”

He just hoped that no one could tell that his heart was racing and a cold sweat had broken out on his forehead. He pushed himself back to his feet.

"Kind of spooky in here, huh?" Tahiri said from behind him.

"Yeah," Anakin admitted. "Definitely spooky."

Walking on the metal mesh made Anakin feel uncomfortable. The weak light from high above did not penetrate that far, and he couldn't help wondering if something might be beneath them, preparing to reach up through the grating. From somewhere in the hangar bay he thought he heard a thump and a scratching sound. He assured himself that it must be his imagination. Any space station—even an abandoned one—might have tiny maintenance droids scurrying about, or maybe some small rodents. Anakin wished he had his brother Jacen's skill for sensing animals through the Force and communicating with them. Anakin tried to reach out with the Force to search for any little creatures that might be in the hangar bay, but he sensed nothing.

Squeak. Squeak. Was that the sound of a small animal? Or was it wheels turning? Anakin pushed the thought from his mind. If anything, he told himself, he should be concentrating on sending out his thoughts to see if he could sense Uldir anywhere. He was relieved when Tionne finally stopped in front of a wide blast door.

"We'll go through here," she said. "It leads directly into the station." Tahiri swallowed hard. "Okay, let's get this over with."

"Yeah," Anakin said, "and let's hope we find Uldir quickly."

The Jedi instructor touched the control panel and the heavy blast door slid upward. Suddenly a blaster bolt whizzed past Anakin's head and spanged off the wall of the hangar bay near Tionne.

"Looks like someone found *us* first,"

Tahiri yelped as she, too, dodged an energy bolt. Then a realization struck Anakin. The blaster fire was not coming from outside the hangar bay, but from *inside*—from behind them. Artoo-

Rebecca Moesta

Detoo shrilled a challenge at their unseen attackers. Instinctively Anakin, Tahiri, Ikrit, and Tionne all hit the floor as more blaster bolts streaked over their heads. But the floor offered no cover, no place to hide. The metal mesh of the walkway bit painfully into Anakin's cheek. It wouldn't be safe to stay where they were, especially if their attackers came at them from underneath. They would have to make a run for it-and soon.

Chapter Eight

Uldir concentrated. His arms were stretched out in front of him, his fingers spread wide. With excitement and pride he watched the gigantic platform rise higher and higher. The plasteel slab must have weighed a thousand kilos or more, and yet it felt like he was lifting it with no effort at all. With a grin of triumph he looked to where Orloc stood in the corner of the cargo storage chamber.

“Hey, I could be wrong, but I think I’m getting pretty good at this,” Uldir said. “It’s so much easier than the way Master Skywalker tried to teach me.”

Orloc blinked several times and looked surprised, as if he had been thinking about something else.

“Why, yes... you show great talent,” he said. “Now, try to put it down.”

“Okay, here goes,” Uldir said.

The Mage gave an absentminded nod and ran a slender finger along the silver spangles at the edges of his purple robe. Uldir dropped his arms to his sides and the enormous platform

Rebecca Moesta

zoomed back down to settle on the floor with a solid *thunk*. Orloc stopped fiddling with the spangles on his cloak and let the material fall back into place. The Mage clapped loudly a few times.

“Why, you are a natural, aren’t you?” he said. “You catch on so quickly.”

Uldir let himself enjoy the praise of his teacher. It was refreshing to hear someone say that he had done well, for a change. Uldir ran a hand through his shaggy chestnut hair.

“The lifting part seems easy now. I still can’t sense anyone’s feelings like Jedi seem to, though.”

“My dear boy, you’re too modest,” Orloc crooned. “Your abilities are greater than you know. Here - I’ll show you. Tell me what I’m thinking right now.” The Mage crossed his slender arms in front of his chest and looked at Uldir with a warm smile. Uldir tried to reach out with the Force to sense what the Mage was thinking. In truth, he could sense nothing. He thought about all of the marvelous things the Mage had shown him how to do in the past day: lifting objects, turning lights or machinery on and off with the wave of a hand, getting a Ranat to obey him by using a “voice of command,” and so much more.

Why, then, was he unable to sense someone’s thoughts? The Mage must be right, Uldir decided-he needed to have more confidence in his abilities. He opened his eyes again and took a guess.

“You... uh, you’re proud of me?”

“There, my boy, you see?” Orloc said with a relieved smile. He stroked his neatly bearded chin with his slender fingers. “You had the power in you to sense my thoughts all along. You just didn’t trust your instincts.”

Uldir felt a rush of relief. He had passed the test-his hardest one so far. *Yes*, he thought, *I will become a Jedi after all. Or something even better: an all-powerful Mage like Orloc himself.*

“Hey, I know what I’d like to try next,” Uldir said, but Orloc quickly held up a hand for silence. His head was cocked to one

side, as if he were listening to something that Uldir couldn't hear. The Mage's face darkened. His brows drew together in an angry frown.

"You betrayed me!" he snapped. "Your meddlesome Jedi friends have just arrived."

"No. They can't be here," Uldir said. "They don't know where I am."

"Really, my boy? Then can you explain why a ship calling itself the *Lore Seeker* has just entered Docking Bay 17?" Orloc raged.

"Please," Uldir said, taking a few steps backward. His voice squeaked with alarm. "It's not my fault. I don't know how they found me-but I don't want to go back with them. I want to stay here with you and learn."

The Mage rested a slender finger against his bearded chin for a moment, as if thinking.

"Very well then. I'll believe you for now. Don't worry, my boy, we're in no danger of being found here. Why, my headquarters are so well hidden it could take them weeks to find us. Exis is, after all, a very large space station. I assure you, your old friends will give up long before they get this far-I'll make certain of that."

Uldir started to breathe a sigh of relief, but the magician fixed him with a piercing glance from his tawny eyes.

"Be careful, my boy. If I find that you've lied to me, I'll strip you of your powers, and you will pay with your life."

"You don't need to threaten me," Uldir pointed out, trying to keep his voice calm. "You're a Mage, so you must be able to sense that I'm telling the truth."

"Yes." At that, Orloc seemed to relax, and he favored Uldir with a cheerful smile. He stroked a hand along the spangles on the sleeve of his robe. "Yes, of course. We'll be quite safe here. In any case, I've already alerted some of my... faithful assistants to keep your friends away from this area. Now then, my boy, what was it you wanted to learn next?"

Rebecca Moesta

Uldir shuddered. That had been a close call. He hoped fervently that his Jedi friends would give up the search for him quickly and leave Exis Station. He didn't want them to get hurt. Nor did he want a confrontation between himself and Orloc.

"I want to know how to make lightning and rain," Uldir said in an uncertain voice that cracked on the word *lightning*.

The Mage shrugged and fingered one of the silver spangles on his sleeve. Lights flickered and tiny droplets began to mist down from the ceiling.

"Lightning and rain, my boy? Nothing simpler. Why, I'll show you how it's done."

"We have to get off this walkway," Anakin yelled. "We're easy targets here."

"Quick-through the blast doors," Tionne urged.

Anakin tried to push himself to his hands and knees in order to crawl toward the opening. A few seconds later, when a blaster bolt hissed over his head, narrowly missing him, he dropped down flat again.

"This way," Tahiri said, pushing past him. She propelled herself forward with her hands, arms, elbows, and knees flat to the floor. Anakin followed suit.

Artoo-Detoo had already made it through the blast doors. Anakin noticed that the lighting was better out in the corridor, but that Ikrit was nowhere in sight. Anakin was within three meters of the blast door when he heard Tahiri's cry of pain. Fearing the worst, Anakin turned back. Even in the uncertain light he could see that her green eyes were alert and wide with panic.

"Are you hit?" he asked.

"No-my hair is caught in the floor grating," she said. "You'd better keep going without me or you'll be shot."

As if to emphasize her point, another blaster bolt zipped past his ear.

STAR WARS: Kenobi's Blade

"I can't leave you here," he said. He reached behind Tahiri's head, hoping to pull her free, but the wavy blonde hair remained stuck. Anakin's heart skipped a beat as an energy bolt skimmed Tahiri's leg and singed the material of her flightsuit. The sharp smell of burning cloth filled Anakin's nostrils. He pulled harder. So did Tahiri. But the hair would not break or pull free.

"We need something to cut with," Anakin said.

Suddenly Tionne was beside them, her light - saber blazing in her hand.

"Anakin, get to the blast door and be ready to close it as soon as we make it through," she ordered.

Anakin wanted to stay with Tahiri, but this was no time to argue. Tionne blocked and deflected blaster bolts with her lightsaber while he launched himself to his feet and ran toward the door. He thought he felt something warm and furry brush against him as he ran, but he could see nothing. Artoo-Detoo warbled encouragement as Anakin dashed out of the hangar bay. With one hand on the blast door controls, Anakin turned just in time to see Tionne's lightsaber slashing in a downward arc.

The next moment it flashed upward again to deflect another blaster bolt. This time Tahiri sat up. The energy blade had done its work, slicing her hair free of its trap. A shadowy form helped the girl to her feet, and Anakin realized that Ikrit was beside her, his fur completely black. Tionne covered their retreat as Tahiri and Ikrit ran toward the exit. She backed toward the blast door, still deflecting energy bolts as she went. The instant that Tahiri and Ikrit were through, Tionne yelled, "Now!"

Anakin hit the controls to close the blast door. The heavy shield began to lower. At the last instant, Tionne dove through the opening, and the blast door shut with a heavy clang.

Chapter Nine

Feeling faint, Tahiri dropped to the floor and gasped in huge lungfuls of air. For a moment in the hangar bay, she had been certain that she would die, chained to the floor by her pale yellow hair.

“Artoo, see if you can scramble those locks,” she heard Anakin call. An instant later, his face swam into Tahiri’s field of view.

“It’s kind of interesting actually,” he said, grinning at her. “The haircut, I mean.”

“Pipes!” Tahiri sat up. Her hand instinctively reached to tug a strand of blonde hair on the side of her head that had been freed by Tionne’s lightsaber. To Tahiri’s surprise she found that the blade had made a clean cut. The hair on the left side of her head was chin-length in front, then swept down at a smooth angle until it blended with her longer hair in back.

“Truly weird,” she murmured. Ikrit, his fur once again snowy white, scurried over to the two junior Jedi.

“The droids will come,” he said in his scratchy voice.

"No time to rest."

Tahiri heard Artoo-Detoo give a triumphant chirp as his probe scrambled the lock on the hangar bay's blast door.

"Droids?" she asked in confusion. "What droids?"

"He means," Tionne said, reaching out a hand to help Tahiri back to her feet, "that our attackers back in the hangar bay are droids."

"I wished to scout without being seen, so I turned my fur black," Ikrit explained. "I counted at least eight droids. I returned when I heard you cry out."

"We'd better get moving," the Jedi teacher said tersely.

"She's right," said Anakin. "Even scrambled access controls won't hold droids for long. We'll be in danger if we stay here."

Still panting from her narrow escape, Tahiri glanced up and down the curved corridor. Except for a few doorways and some access ladders that led up through hatches in the ceiling, the hall was blank and featureless.

"Which way?" Tahiri asked.

In spite of the drumming of her heart in her ears, she could hear trapped droids already starting to work at the blast door.

"I'm not sure which direction is best," Tionne admitted. "I know where the main control center is from here, but I have a feeling that Uldir isn't there. He could be almost anywhere."

"True," Ikrit said. "We must trust the Force."

Artoo-Detoo, who was still plugged into the door's control panel, gave an urgent twitter. More clanking and thumping came from behind the blast door, along with a high-pitched whine.

"Uh-oh. Sounds like the droids are already trying to unscramble the locks," Anakin said.

"Then we'd better decide fast," said Tahiri.

"This way," said Tionne, heading up the corridor.

Just then the blast door raised about ten centimeters, creaking and groaning. Artoo-Detoo gave a frantic squeal as he struggled with the lock controls. The blast door reversed itself and began

Rebecca Moesta

to close again. Artoo-Detoo still warbled and beeped as if trying to warn them.

“Hurry!” Tionne said, motioning for them to follow. The companions dashed after her—all except for Artoo-Detoo. The blast door creaked and groaned again.

“Come on, Artoo!” Anakin yelled.

Artoo beeped twice for no. Tahiri’s stomach clenched.

“If we leave him here, those droids could blast him to pieces.”

Ikrit said suddenly, “But there is a place for us where the droids will not be able to follow.”

Before Tahiri could figure out what the Jedi Master meant, Ikrit turned and sprang toward the wall. He caught and clung to one of the ladders she had seen earlier.

“It will be safest up here if the droids break free,” Ikrit said.

“But Artoo won’t be able to follow us,” Tahiri objected.

“We’ll have to circle back for him later when it’s safe,” Tionne said firmly. “We won’t do Artoo any good if we all get killed now.”

Anakin turned and yelled to the barrel-shaped droid as Tahiri began climbing the ladder.

“Hang on, Artoo! We’ll come back for you.”

Artoo tweeted to show that he understood. Anakin scrambled up after Tahiri, and Tionne brought up the rear. The rungs of the plasteel ladder were hard against Tahiri’s bare feet. She grimaced as she climbed higher and higher, following Ikrit’s furry form.

“It’s not stairs,” she muttered to herself, gritting her teeth. “I never *said* anything about not wanting to climb ladders.”

Once they were through the ceiling hatch, the ladder led upward through a tube-shaft that rose hundreds of meters into the darkness above. The tube curved slightly as they climbed, and soon they could no longer see or hear the corridor far below them. The only sound to be heard in the ladder shaft was the labored breathing of the companions and the rhythmic thumping of their hands and feet on the rungs as they climbed. When they

were certain that the danger was past, Ikrit slowed their pace slightly, but they still kept going.

To Tahiri it seemed like they climbed forever. Her shoulder muscles ached from the effort of pulling herself up one rung after another, and blisters began to form on the soles of her feet.

Suddenly Ikrit stopped. "Wait here," he ordered.

Tahiri paused, gladly hooking an elbow and a leg over ladder rungs to give herself a chance to rest. Ikrit scampered up the ladder and out of sight.

"Are you all right?" Tionne panted from below.

"Sure," Tahiri gasped, "but I think I'd be feeling better if I had remembered to wear my boots."

A second later she yelped in surprise and pain as a finger poked the sole of her bare foot.

"Hold still," Anakin said. "I have something in my medikit that should help seal those blisters and protect your feet for a while."

A heartbeat later, Tahiri felt a cooling spray on the sole of one foot. By the time Anakin finished putting the medicine on both of Tahiri's feet, Ikrit had returned.

"Only a hundred meters more," the furry Jedi Master said. "There is an opening to a small room. We will rest there."

"A place to rest sounds really good right now," Anakin admitted.

With higher spirits and renewed energy, the four companions climbed again. The pain in Tahiri's feet seemed much less important at the moment than getting off this ladder. Now that she knew how far it was to the end of her climb, she wanted to get there as soon as possible. Ignoring the tight knots forming in her shoulder and leg muscles, she climbed faster. After a few more minutes the companions tumbled through a hatch onto the floor of what seemed to be a storage compartment. Boxes and bundles were piled all around, but at least it was a place to rest. Tahiri's arms and legs felt rubbery, and she didn't think she could move right now even if she had to. Tionne found the controls

Rebecca Moesta

for the glowpanels, and the room filled with a soft light. Tahiri noticed that Anakin's limbs were shaking almost as much as hers, even though he was sitting down and leaning against a crate.

In her exhaustion, everything seemed shaky and fuzzy. The whole room was slightly out of focus and tilted at an odd angle. It was a good thing she was already on the floor, she thought distantly, because the room was starting to spin....

Tahiri was surprised when she awoke feeling refreshed and clearheaded. Her muscles still ached, but they did not quiver or threaten to give way when she sat up.

"Welcome back," Anakin said, smiling.

Tionne handed her an energy bar and a small flask of water.

"How long-?" Tahiri began. "Not long," Anakin said.

"Only a few minutes really," Tionne answered, "but I used the Force to deepen your sleep, to help you heal a bit."

"Master Ikrit did the same for me before he went back up the ladder to scout around," Anakin said. "I feel a lot better now."

"I have good news," Tionne said. "Master Ikrit found an old refresher unit in the wall behind that pile of crates."

Tahiri grinned. "That's great news."

"I think I have good news, too," Anakin said. "Since I woke up I've been using the Force to reach out and search the station. It's a little hazy, but I definitely felt Uldir here."

Tionne looked at him with instant interest in her mother-of-pearl eyes.

"Where?" Tahiri asked.

Anakin shook his head. "I can't tell exactly. I don't have much of a bond with him, and he's not strong in the Force. All I know is that he's on Exis somewhere."

Tahiri took a bite of her energy bar and a swig of water as she thought over this bit of information. She swallowed.

"Well, it *is* good to know for certain that he's here. Why don't we take a look around this area while we wait for Ikrit."

"Sure, we might even find some clues that will help us figure out where Uldir is," Anakin said.

"All right," Tionne said, "but let's not go far."

Tahiri wolfed down the rest of her energy bar. After they had all taken turns in the refresher unit, they put their equipment packs back on. Tionne unsealed the door to the storage chamber, and it slid open with a hiss. They found themselves behind a screened partition at one end of a broad room. Air ducts and bright glowpanels were set into the walls and overhead in the main chamber. The room was filled with the strangest assortment of gizmos and gadgets and pieces and parts that Tahiri could remember seeing since that time she and Anakin had ridden inside a Jawa sandcrawler on Tatooine. A net full of supplies hung in one corner. Ropes, cords, and flexible steel cables dangled from every part of the ceiling.

Stacks of crates were piled up high against the walls. On a transparent panel, set like a window into the room partition, a diagram was etched. They all recognized it right away. Anakin rushed forward to study the map.

"It - it's Exis Station," he whispered.

A movement beyond the transparent panel caught Tahiri's eyes.

"Something's out there," she whispered, moving up to stand beside Anakin.

Tionne crowded in next to them, and together they peered through the window in the screened wall. Tahiri identified the creatures she saw instantly, since quite a few of them lived on her home planet of Tatooine.

"Ranats!" she hissed in surprise. Anakin nodded.

"But what are they doing *here*?" Tionne whispered.

They watched in silence for a few minutes. Each Ranat wore a silver band around its arm and a belt of purple cloth. The Ranats began unpacking boxes and satchels filled with tools, gears, strips of shiny metal, and electronic components.

"Looks like they've been salvaging," Anakin said in a low voice.

"Think they're friendly?" Tahiri asked.

Rebecca Moesta

“Maybe if we talk to them they could help us find Uldir.”

The silver-haired Jedi instructor shook her head and backed away from the partition, motioning for Anakin and Tahiri to follow.

“We can’t risk showing ourselves. Don’t forget those droids that attacked us in the hangar bay.”

“These Ranats might work for Orloc-or someone worse,” Anakin agreed.

“Let’s wait. We may not need to go out this way,” Tionne said. “Once we find out what Ikrit has discovered-” Her voice broke off suddenly, and her mother-of-pearl eyes went round with surprise. Tahiri followed the direction of her gaze and then froze. The Ranats had gathered around the diagram of Exis, chittering and gesturing to each other. The three companions stood perfectly still, for fear that any movement would be noticed by the Ranats.

One of the creatures began marking off areas on the map of the station. Another Ranat held up a handful of mechanical parts and pointed toward the outline of a small room on the diagram. The first Ranat chattered and marked off that area as well. This process continued with one Ranat after another.

“Those must be the places on the station where they’ve already salvaged,” Anakin whispered.

When the Ranats finished their mapping, one of them began sorting small parts into labeled bins that were stacked against a wall. Others picked up their empty satchels and left the room. Tahiri guessed they had gone to hunt for more treasures. Another Ranat lifted a heavy crate and disappeared from view. Tahiri groaned with relief. Her comfort was short-lived, however. A moment later the Ranat carrying a crate came around the corner of the partition and saw the companions. The instant it saw them, the Ranat dropped the crate and let out a warning shriek that brought all the other Ranats running.

Chapter Ten

Anakin quickly assessed the danger. Each of the remaining Ranats picked up a hydrospanner, a plasteel bar, or some other heavy object and rushed toward them, chittering angrily. “Definitely not friendly,” he observed.

“I don't like this,” Tahiri said in a tight voice. With a surge of adrenaline, Anakin sprang into action.

Tionne stepped forward, her lightsaber blazing in her hand. Anakin could sense in the back of his mind that Tionne did not plan to kill the Ranats, only to protect the companions from their attack. He lunged forward and pushed at the screened partition that stood between them and the approaching creatures. It wobbled and rocked but did not fall.

Tahiri seemed to understand what he was trying to do. Before he could give the screen another shove, she was there beside him, helping him push. Deflecting a hydrospanner that a Ranat tossed over the partition, Tionne said, “Use the Force.”

They did. With Anakin and Tahiri's next shove the partition fell over, trapping two of their Ranat attackers beneath it. Now

Rebecca Moesta

Tionne leapt over the fallen partition. Her lightsaber flashed, striking at the glowpanels on the wall. One after another they winked out until only a few flickering lights were left. A moment later a ball of white fur sailed across the room, clinging to a cable that dangled from the ceiling. Ikrit had returned and joined the fray. He must have used the Force to yank tools from the hands of their attackers, for Anakin saw several of the makeshift weapons fly through the air to hit the walls of the room with a loud clang. Using the Force, Anakin toppled a stack of crates. The empty boxes came clattering down. At the same time, Tahiri used the Force to shove boxes and crates into the path of running Ranats, who stumbled and fell. In the corner Anakin saw Tionne toss her lightsaber up toward the net filled with metallic canisters.

Ikrit was still sailing back and forth on the cable in the center of the room, and Anakin and Tahiri sent one crate after another scooting across the room toward the rodentlike creatures. The metal canisters spilled out of the net and came crashing to the floor. The last few attacking Ranats could take no more. Dropping their weapons, the purple-sashed creatures fled the room.

“We’d better leave, too,” Tionne advised. “They might come back with reinforcements.”

“Quickly,” Ikrit said. He scrambled up a cable toward one of the air duct panels in the ceiling and pushed it open.

“I’ve discovered an easier way to get around the station.” Tionne switched off her lightsaber and clipped it to her belt while Anakin and Tahiri climbed the cable, then she followed. Once they were all inside the air duct, Ikrit closed the panel again so that the Ranats could not tell how they had escaped. The air ducts were round and roughly a meter across. Ikrit didn’t have to duck and was able to move quickly; the others were forced to crawl. In a few minutes they came to a branching of air ducts and paused to consider their route.

"Mmmm," Ikrit said. "It is sometimes difficult to sense those who are not Jedi." He glanced at Anakin and Tahiri. "Look to the Force. Does it show you where to search for your friend?"

"I can sense Uldir," Anakin said, "but I can't tell exactly where he is."

"We know some of the Ranats are around this area, though," Tionne said. "We're pretty sure that they're working for Orloc."

"I'm almost positive that their sashes were the exact same color as the magician's robe," Tahiri added. "I'd never forget that color. And if we find Orloc, Uldir should be somewhere close by."

"She's right," Anakin said. "I don't think the Mage and Uldir can be far away. We found a map of the station back in the room where the Ranats were working."

"They were marking it to show where they had explored and done their scavenging," Tahiri explained.

Anakin nodded. "That's what makes me think we're close to Orloc's base of operations," he went on. "All of the places marked on the map seemed to be in one area of the space station. If Orloc is their master, I think he'll be at the center of that area." Anakin thought for a moment to get his bearings. "It was that way," he said, pointing through the duct wall at his right.

"Very well then. Follow me," Ikrit said, heading off down the right branch of the air duct. The companions crawled for hours, stopping only for brief periods to share some water out of their packs or to look down into the rooms they passed. Most rooms were empty, since the Ranats had already stripped them clean of all useful objects. Each time the air ducts branched, Ikrit led them toward the area where Anakin believed Orloc must be. Anakin could sense they were on the right track. The rooms they passed began to look lived in, with crates of supplies, sleeping pallets, and droid workstations.

"It's not much farther," Tahiri whispered, "I can feel it."

And she was right. Five minutes later, moving forward as quietly as possible, the companions found what they had been

Rebecca Moesta

looking for. Through a grate in the air duct, they could see the Mage Orloc in his silver-edged purple robe far below in a brightly lit, high-ceilinged room. Ranats in purple sashes and droids of all shapes and sizes surrounded the Mage, ready to do his bidding. Beside Orloc, still dressed in his brown Jedi robe, stood Uldir, his shaggy chestnut hair thrown back. His arms were raised and spread wide. Tahiri and Anakin crowded closer to the grate to get a better look.

“Behold my power,” Uldir said. His voice squeaked once, but it sounded deeper than Anakin remembered. “When I am finished you will go back to your friends and tell them what you have seen.”

“What in the name of the Great Bantha is he doing?” Tahiri whispered.

Glowpanels flickered. Speakers set into the ceiling near the air duct boomed with the sound of recorded thunder. The Mage fidgeted with the silver spangles at the edges of his purple robe and watched his student. Suddenly Anakin heard water running through pipes somewhere nearby. Tiny droplets of water began to mist down through the room from safety sprinklers set into the ceiling.

Below, Uldir closed his hands into fists and laughed. The laughter echoed through the room, growing louder and louder.

“Now tell your friends about the wonders you have seen. Then tell them to leave,” Uldir shouted. “I have no need of their puny powers.”

Tahiri’s green eyes blinked quizzically at Anakin.

“Who is he talking to?” she whispered.

Anakin scooted around to the other side of the grate to get a better view. Then he saw it: in the far corner of the room, drenched with “rainwater” and wearing a restraining bolt, was Artoo-Detool!

Chapter Eleven

“They have Artoo!” Anakin whispered. He pointed down through the air duct toward the corner where the little droid was being held captive. “They put a restraining bolt on him.”

Tahiri leaned forward, trying to see where Anakin was pointing.

“Don’t worry,” Tionne said, “we’ll set him free.”

Then, without warning, disaster struck. Anakin and Tahiri were leaning over on either side of the air duct grate when the entire panel gave way. For the next minute everything seemed to move in slow motion. The grate fell, tumbling end over end toward the floor. Taken by surprise, Anakin and Tahiri fell, too. In a heartbeat, all of Uncle Luke’s lessons about the Force flooded back into Anakin’s mind. He could feel his Jedi instincts taking over. *Relax and trust the Force.* Through the Force Anakin visualized the distance from ceiling to floor as nothing more than a short hop. He thought of the speed of his fall as no greater than it would have been had he jumped off a low wall.

Rebecca Moesta

With his mind, he created a springy cushion of air just above the hard deckplates. He knew that the floor was no longer rushing up toward him with a speed that would break his bones when he landed. He let his mind and body relax. Out of the corner of his eye Anakin saw the ceiling grate strike a glancing blow to a tarnished pirate droid. The weight of the hard panel bent one of its firing arms.

The grating clanged heavily to the floor. Anakin sensed Tahiri right beside him, and he sensed her trust in the Force. Below them Uldir's arm was raised, almost as if he were waving a greeting. Then Anakin and Tahiri reached the floor, bouncing slightly on the cushion of air. A moment later Tionne and Ikrit touched down behind them with a soft *thump-thump*. Uldir faced them all. His amber eyes blazed with anger.

"Why are you here?"

"For one thing," Tionne answered, "we're here to get back some objects that belong to us." She advanced toward one of Orloc's pirate droids that held the Holocron in its mechanical grip.

Anakin noticed that Obi-Wan Kenobi's lightsaber hung from Orloc's belt. The droid retreated and raised its blaster arm to point at Tionne. From the corner of the room Artoo-Detoo shrilled a warning. Tionne paused to assess the situation.

"We also came for you, Uldir," Anakin said.

"Come back to the Jedi academy with us," Tahiri pleaded. "You don't belong here."

Uldir's lip curled in a sneer. "So, you want to stop me just when I have real power within my reach? Just when I'm beginning to use the powers I always knew I could have? I thought you were my friends. I thought that you would be happy for me." His voice broke and sounded as if it might change, but Uldir stopped to clear his throat. When he continued, his voice came out strong and deep. "Surely you must have seen the storm I called up just a few minutes ago."

STAR WARS: Kenobi's Blade

"You mean you really believe that *you* did all that?" Tahiri asked, confused.

"Yes," the broad-shouldered teenager said proudly. "I made the thunder and the lightning and the rain."

"But that's not real power," Tahiri said. "It was just glowpanels flickering-and the ceiling speakers made the thunder."

"She's right," Anakin said. "None of those things happened because of any power you called forth. Your 'rain' came out of the emergency sprinklers up above. It was just a trick that Orloc played on you."

Uldir's face clouded with doubt. He looked at the Mage. Orloc shrugged eloquently.

"These children hope to trick you out of the power that's rightfully yours, my boy. Of course the glowpanels flickered. The lightning you made caused an electrical disturbance. And as for the emergency sprinklers? Why, I assure you *those* haven't worked in centuries."

While Uldir and Orloc were distracted, Anakin reached out with the Force and tried to loosen Artoo-Detoo's restraining bolt. The Mage clucked and shook his head sadly.

"I did my best to keep these meddlers from interfering, but you must know that we can't just give them my lightsaber and my Holocron. Why, your training has just begun, my boy. I'm afraid there's no other choice. We'll have to eliminate them."

Anakin gasped, unwilling to believe their friend would really hurt them.

Uldir shook his head.

"No. I used the Force to keep them safe when they were falling. I can't just let you kill them now."

Anakin and Tahiri exchanged surprised glances. Uldir thought *he* had saved them from falling? Anakin nudged with the Force at Artoo's restraining bolt again.

"Just let them go," Uldir urged. His voice was ragged with emotion. "*Please*. I'll make sure they don't come back."

Rebecca Moesta

“Sentimental fool,” Orloc scoffed. “Why, I know of only one way to be sure they won’t return.” The Mage reached for the lightsaber at his belt and held it high.

But before he could turn it on, the lightsaber sprang from Orloc’s hand as if drawn by a magnet and flew into Ikrit’s grasp. At the same moment Tionne also used the Force to yank the Holocron away from the pirate droid. She caught it in midair. Orloc’s face flushed with rage.

“Get them!” he roared, clutching his purple cloak. Smoke billowed behind him. Thunder exploded from the speakers.

“No-don’t hurt my friends!” Uldir shouted.

One of the Ranats dove toward Ikrit, but the Jedi Master easily jumped over its head to land safely on the other side. Three more Ranats in purple sashes tackled him and wrested the lightsaber from Ikrit’s grip, but they could not hold on to the spry Jedi Master. Just then Anakin succeeded in popping free the restraining bolt that held Artoo-Detoo in place. The little droid gave a defiant squeal and rolled forward to help defend his friends. Glowpanels flickered. Water showered from the sprinklers overhead.

“Run,” Tionne yelled.

Anakin and Tahiri needed no further encouragement. They ran.

“Come with us, Uldir,” Tahiri shouted over her shoulder as they headed for the door.

Uldir did not answer, and there was no time to wait.

Tionne and Ikrit were right behind them, but so were the Ranats and the droids. The children were soaked by the time they reached the corridor. Still running, they headed left, but stopped when a blaster bolt zinged off the wall just in front of them.

“Turn!” Ikrit warned. Anakin and Tahiri spun and pelted the other direction down the hallway. The deck was smooth metal. As they rounded a curve, one of Anakin’s feet slipped out from under him. He fell to the deckplates. At the same instant an energy bolt sang through the air in the exact place where his head

had been a moment earlier. Before Tahiri or the others could help, Anakin rolled, bounced back to his feet, and kept running.

"Should we climb to the air ducts again?" Tahiri gasped.

A blaster bolt hit the ceiling above them, spraying sparks and molten plasteel in all directions.

"No time," Anakin said. "They're too close."

"There's a doorway up ahead," Tionne said, clutching the Holocron to her with one hand. "Maybe if we get inside we can secure the room and hold them off." Ikrit bounded ahead and unsealed the door.

The companions ran headlong through the opening, and the door slid shut behind them. Anakin turned toward the controls, hoping to lock the door against their attackers. Tionne, however, had already ignited her lightsaber and slashed at the control panel. The door would not open to the enemy anytime soon.

"Uh-oh," Anakin heard Tahiri say behind him. "I'm not sure this is the best place for us to hide."

Instantly wary, Anakin looked around the room. What he saw filled him with dismay. The chamber they had entered was barrel-shaped, like the inside of a hollow drum. Its polished metal walls and floors were covered with lights, nozzles, hologram projectors, speakers, half-assembled droids, and all sorts of gadgets that Anakin didn't recognize. The room's ceiling was three stories high, and a catwalk ran all the way around the wall above their heads. Two huge ancient-looking statues as high as the catwalk faced each other across the thirty-meter width of the chamber. A complicated control panel was set back into the wall beside the far statue. Anakin's alert mind put together all the pieces and came to a quick conclusion.

"I think we stumbled into Orloc's main laboratory or workshop... his headquarters. This must be where he manufactures all that high-tech 'magic' we've been seeing."

"I knew all along he wasn't a real magician," Tahiri said. "Uldir will have to believe us now."

Rebecca Moesta

Suddenly the Mage's laughter boomed from above them-amplified by speakers in the ceiling. A doorway appeared in the far wall beside the control panel in a place where there had been no doorway visible a moment before. Behind it stood Orloc with several of his droids and Ranats.

"I'll take back that Holocron now," the Mage's voice thundered. "You won't be needing it anymore."

Chapter Twelve

Keeping her eyes on the Mage, Tahiri took a deep calming breath. She was certain that Orloc would try to kill them now, and she was amazed to realize that she felt pity for the Mage mixed with her fear of him. She sensed that he wasn't nearly as sure of himself as he pretended to be. Suddenly Orloc's voice boomed out again and Tahiri knew he must have speakers hidden in the walls to amplify his words.

"Why not save yourselves a lot of trouble and give up now? You cannot hope to defeat me. My followers and I have you outnumbered by at least ten to one."

Tahiri felt Tionne place a hand on her shoulder. Her other hand, still holding the Holocron, rested on Anakin's shoulder. Strength and encouragement flowed through her touch.

"But our power comes from the Force," the silvery-haired instructor said, "so don't assume that the odds are in your favor."

Orloc's hollow laugh echoed around and around the curved walls of the large room.

Rebecca Moesta

“Why then, we must put your confidence in the Force to the test-and we will see whose power is the greater.”

“Wait. Where’s Uldir?” Tahiri asked.

The Mage raised his purple-robed arms in a shrug.

“I left him behind with your little droid. He knows nothing of my secret passageways into this room. Unfortunately, his friendship with you makes him weak and sentimental. This fight need not concern him. Now give me back my Holocron.” Orloc made a motion with one hand, and a dozen Ranats in purple sashes appeared on the circular walkway five meters above the floor. Each Ranat held a blaster.

“We don’t want to hurt you,” Anakin said.

The Mage only laughed again.

“Why, isn’t that a pity!” He folded his arms across his chest.

Tahiri noticed that Orloc’s fingers still played with the silver spangles that edged his robe. Thunder echoed through the chamber. The sharp lightning - storm smell of ozone filled the air. Mist began to seep outward from the walls, hiding the armed rodent creatures up on the catwalk.

“Now defend yourselves-if you’re able,” Orloc scoffed.

A blaster bolt ricocheted off the floor directly in front of Tahiri.

“I will take care of the Ranats,” Ikrit said to his companions. “May the Force be with you.”

Then the Jedi Master bounded toward the closest wall and swarmed up one of the metal ladders toward the catwalk. More energy bolts whizzed toward the companions.

Trust the Force, Tahiri reminded herself as Ikrit’s furry white form disappeared into the mist above. The next moment she and Anakin dropped to the floor and rolled in opposite directions. Blaster shots missed them by a few centimeters and spanged harmlessly off the floor. Tionne’s lightsaber was in her hand now. With her blade she caught the energy bolts that came at her, deflecting them toward the ceiling. Tahiri jumped back to her feet, grabbed Anakin’s hand, and pulled him toward one of the

tall statues. Realizing that she meant to use the statue as a shield, Anakin ran with her. As they dashed for shelter, several blasters - twisted and warped beyond all hope of repair - clanged to the deckplates beneath the catwalk. Dodging between the statue and the wall, Anakin grinned at Tahiri.

"Good for Ikrit," he said. "I don't think we'll have to worry about those Ranats anymore."

Tahiri peeked out from behind the statue.

"Yipes!" she said. "Maybe we don't have Ranats to worry about, but here come the droids. I wonder where Master Ikrit went."

She looked around the side of the statue again. The Mage himself still stood near the opposite wall. Fog hovered behind him and a dramatic purple spotlight shone down from above, so that it looked as if he was surrounded by a bright purple haze. Tahiri knew he must be directing the attack, but she wasn't sure how.

"Are the droids coming this way?" Anakin asked, tapping the statue experimentally. It gave a hollow *thunk*, like a bell made of pottery.

"Yes," Tahiri said. "Uh-oh! They're halfway across the room! Tionne is trying to draw their attention. She's under the catwalk."

"Good," Anakin said. "Remember how we've used the Force together before? One of us thinks an object light and the other one lifts or pushes it?"

"Of course I remember," Tahiri whispered. "We're a team."

Suddenly she understood what he wanted to do.

"Okay... now!" Anakin said.

Tahiri let her eyes fall closed and imagined the statue being light, as light as a soap bubble floating on the air. Beside her she heard Anakin's quick indrawn breath. Then, just a few seconds later, a colossal crash reverberated through the room as the statue toppled and broke against the hard deckplates. Tahiri opened her eyes to survey their handiwork. Statue rubble lay scattered everywhere. In the wreckage she counted at least five

Rebecca Moesta

ruined droids. One of the still-intact pirate droids turned and fired at them. They ducked and separated.

“Fools,” Orloc’s voice snarled. “Why, I can defeat you without my Ranats or my droids, if need be.” He toyed with the spangled sleeve of his cloak. An ominous clanking, chugging sound rumbled from beneath the floor.

Before Tahiri could figure out what the sound meant, a door slid open in the curved wall. All of the droids in the room swiveled their blasters to point at it. Still crouched and ready to dodge blaster fire, Tahiri saw Uldir’s broad shoulders and shaggy chestnut hair framed in the doorway. Beside him, riding on Artoo-Detoo’s domed head, was Ikrit.

“So this is the chamber of wonders you’ve told me about,” Uldir said in a voice that was deeper and steadier than Tahiri had ever heard from him before. Orloc looked surprised and confused for a moment. The ominous clanking, chugging sound grew louder. His eyes blinked furiously. Then he recovered.

“Why, yes, my boy,” he said pleasantly. “As long as you’re here, stay where you are-and watch true power in action.”

Chapter Thirteen

Uldir watched as the Mage, his teacher, spread his arms wide. For some reason, Orloc held tightly to the silver edges of his purple cloak. Uldir soon saw why. A powerful wind roared through the room. The purple robe flapped madly about the Mage. Uldir's shaggy hair whipped around his face. Across the room Tionne, Anakin, and Tahiri looked as though they might be blown backward by the gale. Beside Uldir, Ikrit's snowy fur rippled like a field of grain in a storm.

"Mmmm. Watch carefully, young man," the little Jedi Master said to Uldir, "and see the magician's tricks for what they are. The Force is not with him. His magic is not real."

Uldir shook his head stubbornly.

"No, furball. I can't ignore what I've seen with my own eyes. How can you deny his power when he's showing it right here in front of you? I've used that power myself."

"Tricks," Ikrit's raspy voice replied. "Only tricks. The man's one true power is the power to deceive. He has lied to you, and

Rebecca Moesta

you believe. It is because you believe him that his magic appears so strong.”

“I can’t close my eyes to what’s right in front of me,” Uldir said.

“No,” Ikrit answered. “Keep your eyes open. But let yourself *see* what is truly before you.”

Anakin held an arm in front of his face to block the wind that stung his eyes. He couldn’t hear anything above the roar of the gale, except for the deep thrumming and chugging of machinery beneath the floor. Then a bright, bright light began to pulse overhead.

On-off. On-off On-off.

The strobing light made it harder to see the approaching droids. But one thing Anakin could see: Orloc was now holding Obi-Wan Kenobi’s lightsaber in one hand.

The blade flamed bright blue. Staring at the lightsaber, Anakin took a step forward. Tahiri’s hand grabbed his arm and yanked him back. A split second later, a jet of superhot steam shot up from the floor right in front of them.

Soon steam jets began spouting up like geysers all over the floor of the room. The pirate droids seemed to know where they were going. In the flashes of bright light Anakin could see that the droids were still coming toward them and that they were avoiding the steam jets.

“We have to get that lightsaber back,” Tahiri yelled.

“It’s too dangerous for you,” Tionne answered.

“I’ll go.” Anakin knew that the Force could guide his silvery-haired instructor around the steam jets, but could she dodge blaster bolts from the droids at the same time? “Watch out for the droids,” he shouted to Tionne.

“I won’t have to,” she yelled back. “I’m going up.” She pointed toward the catwalk that ran around the side of the room. It was clearly visible, now that the wind had blown the mist away. All of the Ranats had disappeared. On the catwalk, Tionne might

be able to go all the way around to the other side of the room and drop down on the Mage from above.

"Go ahead. We'll be fine," Anakin shouted.

Tionne clipped her lightsaber to her belt and ran toward a ladder on the wall. The Mage must have seen it too in the flashes of light. His voice boomed from the wall speakers.

"Get the Jedi woman. She is the most dangerous one. We can take care of the children and that... that *animal* later."

"No," Tahiri screamed as the pirate droid nearest them turned and fired up the ladder after Tionne.

"It missed!" Anakin said. He recognized the tarnished droid as the one that had been hit by the falling panel when they'd all tumbled out of the air duct in the other room.

"His aim is off," he yelled to Tahiri.

"Then help me," she said, pointing to a heavy chunk of statue. Together, he and Tahiri used the Force to lift the solid chunk and send it flying toward the droid. As the tarnished droid fired again they brought the chunk crashing down on its blaster arm. In the flashes of light Anakin saw its arm break off and fall to the floor, but the sound was masked by the roar of the wind and the chugging of the steam jets. The other pirate droids were having problems getting through the rubble of the statue.

"Very well then. Behold the power of a Mage," Orloc's voice rang from the speakers above. With a loud sizzling, all of the ladders leading to the catwalk lit up in a bright flash.

"Tionne!" Tahiri screamed. Anakin whirled back toward the ladder that Tionne had been climbing, only to have his worst fears confirmed. His teacher had almost reached the catwalk, but somehow Orloc must have sent an electrical current through the ladders that led to the structure. The Holocron dropped from Tionne's hand and clattered to the floor. The Mage's laughter thundered from the loudspeakers.

Another jolt of electricity flashed along the walls and through the ladders. Anakin sensed Tionne using every ounce of Force to push herself away from the ladder. In the next strobe of light he

Rebecca Moesta

caught sight of her again. Tionne hung for a moment high in the air. Then she fell. Heedless of the danger to themselves, Tahiri and Anakin ran toward their fallen teacher, dodging jets of hot steam as they went. When they reached her, Tionne was trying to move, but her muscles were shaking. Anakin could smell singed hair. He saw that some of Tionne's silvery strands had been scorched. The instructor tried to reach for her lightsaber but stopped and cried out in pain.

"Must-fight-Orloc," she gasped.

Anakin reached out and unclipped the light - saber from Tionne's belt. He tried to hand it to his teacher, but Tahiri yelled, "No! Her hands and feet are covered with blisters. She won't be able to stand, much less hold a lightsaber."

In a voice almost too weak to be heard above the wind Tionne said, "Ikrit."

Then she fainted. Anakin whirled toward the Jedi Master, who, from his perch on Artoo-Detoo, had just lifted one of Orloc's few remaining droids using the Force and smashed it down again. As if he sensed Anakin's urgency, Ikrit looked straight at him in the flashing light. Another droid advanced toward Anakin and Tahiri and their unconscious teacher. Tahiri tossed chunks of broken statue at the droid.

"Catch," Anakin yelled to Ikrit, and hurled the lightsaber.

Even though Ikrit was twenty meters away on the other side of the room, the lightsaber flew straight and true right into the Jedi Master's grip. Drawing himself to his full height on top of Artoo-Detoo, Ikrit switched on the blade.

Orloc's booming laughter mocked them.

"Why - do you *really* want to trust a child's pet to fight me?"

Artoo-Detoo shrilled a challenge and rolled toward the Mage. The blade in Ikrit's hand sparkled with silver-white fire as he rode forward to meet Orloc in battle.

Chapter Fourteen

A sense of horror flooded through Uldir. With growing alarm, he watched the fight between those he had thought of as his friends and the man he had thought of as his teacher. He had never considered the Mage his friend, of course, but Uldir had believed he could learn the way of the Jedi from this man. By now, though, Uldir realized that Orloc's power was not from the Force. The Mage did not use his magic to help others as Jedi did. Orloc's magic was selfish and destructive.

In a flash of clarity that had nothing to do with the strobing lights overhead, Uldir knew he had to do something to save his friends. Even if it meant giving up all hope of ever becoming a Jedi—even if it meant that the Mage might try to kill him, as well. Uldir could no longer follow Orloc. The lives of Anakin, Tahiri, Ikrit, and Tionne were in danger. And the companions would not have been here if it weren't for him.

Uldir knew he had to act, and soon. In the center of the room, Anakin and Tahiri were busy battling an assassin droid. Far away from them the wise Jedi Master, on Artoo-Detoo, was

Rebecca Moesta

now almost directly in front of Orloc. In spite of the gale-force winds, Ikrit held his lightsaber high and did not waver. He might not have looked as impressive as a Mage, but to Uldir it was obvious that Ikrit was a Jedi Master. Uldir gritted his teeth when the Mage laughed at Ikrit—a rude, mean-spirited laugh.

“If you insist on fighting me, little hairball,” Orloc said, “why, we *must* do this properly.”

Suddenly the lights stopped flashing. They sank to a dusky glow, so that the two lightsabers burned brightly in the dimness. The roaring wind died down to a brisk breeze. The Mage blinked his tawny eyes furiously for a moment. Then he snapped his fingers and said, “Dispose of the Jedi woman. I’ll take care of this one.”

From out of the shadows behind Orloc appeared what must have been the Mage’s last remaining pirate droid. Uldir recognized what kind of droid it was right away: an assassin. He closed his eyes for the briefest moment. Uldir knew that he had to act now or his friends were done for.

No guts, no glory, he reminded himself. A torrent of power surged through him.

Anakin Solo crouched beside his friend Tahiri, guarding the injured Tionne. Together, they had buried the last droid attacker under a pile of rubble from the statue. Now, as Anakin watched the purple-robed Mage again, the pieces of the latest puzzle came together in his mind. He knew how to defeat Orloc! For the moment, though, he would have to leave the Mage to Master Ikrit, because Orloc had just sent a new assassin droid straight toward Anakin and his friends.

They would have to do some fast thinking. The assassin droid used a repulsor to hover above the floor. Since it had no wheels, it could easily pass over the shards of broken statue that had kept the other pirate droids away. The droid’s six arms each ended in a different tool. In the dim light Anakin could make out a blaster arm, a clamp hand with jagged edges, and a half-meter - long

spike. It was too dark to see any more than that... but that was more than enough.

"Help me move Tionne," Tahiri said. They lifted their teacher, but jets of superhot steam shot up behind them, blocking their retreat. As they laid Tionne back down, she moaned a single word, "Holocron," before passing out again.

Tahiri swallowed hard and gently stroked her teacher's hair.

"Not yet," she whispered, though she knew Tionne couldn't hear her. "We've got other problems to handle first."

Anakin looked back toward the assassin droid. It was fifteen meters away now. Across the room, Ikrit's lightsaber and Orloc's stolen one crashed together in a shower of sparks. The assassin droid fired its blaster at Anakin and Tahiri, and the two friends dropped to the floor. Across the room the two lightsaber blades clashed again. At the same moment, Anakin saw Uldir charging across the center of the room. Looking as fearless as an ancient Jedi, the teenager nimbly dodged jets of steam and leapt over chunks of the broken statue. His chestnut hair flying behind him, Uldir let out a fierce war cry. The assassin droid swiveled toward him. At the end of one of its arms a jagged saw blade began to spin.

Uldir had untied the belt of his Jedi robe, and now, still running at full speed toward the deadly droid, he pulled off his brown robe, leaving only the orange flightsuit underneath. Anakin held his breath and waited for the right moment. A blaster bolt sang past Uldir's shoulder, but he didn't hesitate. He dove at the assassin droid and flung his robe over it, blinding the droid's sensors.

It kept firing through the robe as Uldir fell, catching him in the shoulder with a wild shot. Uldir hit the floor hard and rolled out of the way as quickly as he could.

"Now!" he yelled to Anakin and Tahiri. "You can do it!"

The two junior Jedi let the Force flow through them. Anakin gave the droid a hard shove with his mind.

Rebecca Moesta

“You picked the wrong team to attack this time,” Tahiri cried, adding her power to Anakin’s. As if the droid weighed no more than a feather, it floated into the air, spun wildly, and crashed against the wall of the circular chamber.

Something sparked beneath the brown robe. The assassin twirled and tried to free itself of its shroud. Wounded though he was, Uldir scrambled along the wall until he found the precious object he was looking for.

“I’ve got it!” he shouted, holding up the Holocron. Just then across the room Orloc cried out in rage, and Anakin saw Obi-Wan Kenobi’s light - saber fly from the Mage’s grasp. The hilt tumbled end over end through the air, no longer lit, and fell to the floor with a clatter just a few meters from Anakin. The Force flowed, directing Anakin’s movements. Even though Uldir was wounded and Tionne was in danger, he knew he would have to confront the Mage to save them all.

With two leaps he reached the lightsaber handle, scooped it up, and sprinted straight toward Orloc. The furious Mage ran his hands along the spangled sleeves of his cloak and flung his arms out wide. A cloud of smoke burst in front of Anakin, but he kept going.

Next, swarms of miniature TIE fighters dropped from the ceiling to head him off. Anakin ducked. Blaster fire exploded in the air in front of him.

“It’s not real, Anakin,” Uldir yelled. His strong voice carried easily above the sounds of blaster fire and steam jets. “Show him, Tahiri!”

With that, he threw the Holocron straight at the blond girl. The pearly cube sailed through the air in a smooth arc. Tahiri caught it easily, as if the Force had guided it right into her hands. “Look, Anakin!” she cried.

Suddenly, a hologram of Ash Krimsan filled the entire room, larger than Anakin had ever seen her.

“Welcome, my children. What may I teach you today?” the kindly Jedi Master asked.

STAR WARS: Kenobi's Blade

"Teach us about lies," Uldir shouted. In the image, the scarlet-robed old Jedi spread her hands. "Lies can only defeat you if you give them the power of your belief," she said simply.

Tiny TIE fighters flew through the kind old face, diving and shooting, and Anakin saw them for what they really were: holograms. As the image of Ash Krimsan dissolved, Anakin began running again, straight through the swarm of TIE fighters. He heard the assassin droid smash once more against the wall, and something in the back of his mind told him that Tahiri had taken over protecting Tionne.

He also knew that Ikrit and Artoo were on their way to help her. Thunder boomed from the speakers hidden in the walls, but Anakin did not stop until he stood directly before Orloc. Then, pressing the switch on the handle of Kenobi's blade, Anakin ignited the lightsaber. The blade hummed in his hand, a bright pure blue sending its light through the darkness. Orloc's tawny eyes blinked furiously and he lifted his arms, as if to bring lightning down on Anakin. Anakin raised the lightsaber. From a distance, Anakin heard Uldir cry, "Don't hurt him!"

Anakin didn't put down the lightsaber.

"Trust me," he called to his friend. Then he brought the blade sweeping downward in a curving arc at the purple-robed Mage. Silver spangles flew through the air and sparkled as they pattered to the floor. The holograms disappeared. Anakin brought the lightsaber up again and swept down once more. Wires sparked and spangles fell.

The Mage howled with anguish, "No! You've destroyed it!" But his voice no longer boomed from the speakers overhead; it seemed weak and puny. The Mage ran his fingers along the edge of his purple cloak, which was now in tatters. There were no more silver spangles-nothing left with which to control his "magic."

Anakin had realized that the Mage touched the dangling bits of silver each time he used his "powers." Now Orloc was

Rebecca Moesta

stripped of his controls. The Mage looked past Anakin. His eyes held a tortured look.

“Please, help me,” he said.

Anakin turned to see Uldir. His friend’s amber eyes were filled with pity-only pity. Uldir slowly shook his head and put a hand up to touch his injured shoulder.

“You would have killed my friends-and maybe even me-just to keep the Holocron and Obi-Wan Kenobi’s lightsaber. You thought they could give you true power, just like I believed you could give me real power. The power of the Force is real. But you knew you never had it. I was the fool.”

“Why, I still have one power left to me,” the magician snarled. Anakin turned to look at Orloc, but in a bright flash and a puff of smoke, the Mage was gone. Anakin knew that the smoke was not magical. It was merely one of Orloc’s tricks, and he wondered if they should follow the Mage.

Uldir struggled over to Anakin’s side, holding one hand to his wounded shoulder.

“I think we can let him go now,” Uldir said. “He’s lost his droids, his Ranats, his robe, his chamber of wonders, the Holocron, and Kenobi’s blade. I don’t think he’ll attack us again.”

“Mmmm. Perhaps he has learned a lesson,” Ikrit murmured, coming to stand by them.

“I hope so,” Uldir said. His voice was deep and sad. “I certainly have.”

Chapter Fifteen

Tahiri snugged a webbed belt across Tionne's unconscious form. The Jedi teacher lay on the repulsorsled that Uldir had pointed out to Ikrit. Artoo-Detoo gave a mournful whistle.

"Don't worry. Ikrit says she'll be just fine," Tahiri assured the little droid. "We just need to get her to a bacta tank to heal her wounds."

"I'm sorry I caused so much trouble," Uldir said. "I never thought anyone would get hurt."

"Your injury will also heal in a bacta tank," Ikrit said. The white-furred Jedi Master finished bandaging Uldir's shoulder where the teenager had been hit by the assassin droid's blaster.

"We'd better hurry," Tahiri said, hovering anxiously at Tionne's side.

Anakin checked the controls of the repulsorsled and powered it on. Tahiri blinked as a new thought struck her.

"Tionne won't be able to pilot the *Lore Seeker* out of here," she said, turning to Ikrit. "Can you take over?"

Rebecca Moesta

“The *Lore Seeker*’s controls will not adjust to a pilot as small as I,” Ikrit said. “Perhaps we could take the *Sunrider*.”

Uldir cleared his throat and looked sheepish. “Um... I’m afraid that Orloc’s Ranats did some scavenging aboard your ship. I think it might take a while to get the *Sunrider* spaceworthy again. But if you don’t mind, I could fly us all home in the *Lore Seeker*—with a little help from my friends, that is.”

“Can you fly with your shoulder wounded like that?” Tahiri asked. “Does it hurt very much?”

“It hurts, but I can fly,” Uldir said. He tried to shrug, and instantly grimaced with pain. “Anyway, I’m not really worried about me. We’ve got to get Tionne out of here and get her to some medical help.”

“Are you sure you can pilot *Tionne*’s ship?” Tahiri asked hopefully, tugging at a long strand of blonde hair on the side that had not been trimmed by the lightsaber.

Uldir nodded. “I’ve watched Tionne fly it a few times.”

His voice was deep and sure as he gave them all a shy smile.

“And I really *am* a good pilot, you know. I want to help. That is, if I can count on one of you to be my copilot and one to act as navigator.”

Ikrit sprang to the top of Artoo-Detoo’s domed head.

“Mmmm. It is a good plan,” the Jedi Master said in his scratchy voice. Artoo-Detoo beeped and whistled excitedly.

Tahiri grinned at Uldir. “I think that’s a definite yes.”

Uldir had never been happier to see the bright green moon of Yavin 4 appear in the front viewports. With the help of Ikrit and Artoo, he had done an excellent job of piloting the *Lore Seeker*. Anakin and Tahiri took shifts in the crew compartment, tending their injured teacher with supplies from the ship’s emergency medikit. The silvery-haired instructor had been unconscious for most of the trip, but when she awakened and began to speak, Anakin came forward to the cockpit to share the good news.

STAR WARS: Kenobi's Blade

"Tionne says that she was using a Jedi healing trance that Uncle Luke taught her," Anakin explained.

"Mmmm," Master Ikrit said, "I am glad she used the healing trance. She will recover quickly."

"That's great news," Uldir agreed. He felt happier and more relaxed than he could remember being in years. "We'll have her back on Yavin 4 in less than an hour." Anakin looked at the older boy with surprise.

"Uldir..." Anakin hesitated, as if unsure of what he wanted to say. "I thought you told me you hated to fly, but you seem to be enjoying yourself."

Uldir turned and grinned at his friend.

"I did. And I am. In the past week I've figured out that I don't mind flying. In fact, I enjoy it. Well, not the kind of flying that my parents do—you know, the same old shuttle flying the same old routes, carrying the same old supplies. But I've realized that that's not the only kind of flying there is."

Anakin nodded. "As Tionne likes to say, there are always options."

Uldir took the *Lore Seeker* down into the atmosphere of Yavin 4.

"I've heard her say that," he said. "I guess it never sank in before, but now I finally know what she means."

A week later, Anakin stood on the landing field in front of the Jedi academy with his best friend Tahiri, Ikrit, and Artoo-Detoo. Tionne, now fully healed, was talking quietly with Master Skywalker, who had returned from Coruscant the day before.

Uldir, his bags packed and ready to go, stood near the *Lightning Rod*, old Peckhum's battered supply ship.

"I'm sorry I messed up your ship, Master Ikrit," Uldir said.

There was no trace of squeaking or cracking in his deep voice.

"Mmmm. I may return to Exis for the *Sunrider* someday," Ikrit said. "But I came away with something equally important."

Rebecca Moesta

The furry Jedi Master patted the lightsaber he now wore clipped at his belt.

"I have just built myself this new Jedi weapon. Because of you, I learned that there are still causes worth fighting for and students well worth teaching. For that, I thank you."

"One thing I don't understand, though," Uldir said. "If I didn't really have any magic powers, how did I dodge the steam jets and the blaster bolts? How did I defeat the assassin droid? How did I throw the Holocron straight into Tahiri's hands? I mean, I thought I was trusting in the Force right then. Was I just lucky?"

Luke Skywalker came over to place a hand on Uldir's shoulder.

"No. Trusting in the Force is not just luck."

Uldir had spent several hours last night in conversation with Master Skywalker, but Anakin had no idea what they had said.

"I think you learned more than you knew while you were with us," Tionne said with a warm smile. "So perhaps the Force guided you, after all."

Old Peckhum now appeared from behind the *Lightning Rod*.

"You about ready to go?" he called.

"Just a minute," Uldir called back. Then he took Anakin and Tahiri aside. "I'll have to leave soon," he said.

"We'll miss you," Anakin replied. Tahiri gave Uldir a fierce hug. "Remember that we'll always be your friends," she said.

"I know that now," Uldir answered. "I also know that there are no shortcuts to real knowledge and power. Anyway, that's not what I want anymore."

"Are you going to be a pilot?" Tahiri asked.

Uldir grinned. "One of the best pilots ever. Master Skywalker says there's a group of emergency pilots on Coruscant. They help evacuate people during disasters, fly emergency medical supplies to colonies, pick up and deliver ships that are old or difficult to fly. Most importantly, they help people. So in my own way I'll be

STAR WARS: Kenobi's Blade

a bit like a Jedi.” He smiled again. “A bit like my two best friends.”

With that, Uldir made his last goodbyes, and he and old Peckhum got into the *Lightning Rod*. The ship lifted off, and Anakin, Tahiri, Luke, Tionne, and Ikrit all waved farewell. Artoo-Detoo gave a hopeful warble. As the ship carrying their friend dwindled to a speck in the sky,

Anakin and Tahiri both said, “May the Force be with you.”

About the Author

Nancy Richardson Fischer is a graduate of Cornell University, a published author with children's, teen and adult titles to her credit, including *Star Wars* titles for Lucas Film and numerous athlete autobiographies, such as Julie Krone, Bela Karolyi and Monica Seles. She lives in the Pacific Northwest.

About the Author

Rebecca Moesta (pronounced MESS-tuh) is the bestselling author of forty books, both solo and in collaboration with her husband, Kevin J. Anderson. Her solo work includes *A Christmas to Remember* (based on the Hallmark tv movie by the same name), Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Junior Jedi Knights novels, short stories, articles, ghost writing, and editing anthologies. With Kevin, she wrote the Crystal Doors trilogy, the Young Jedi Knights series, movie and game novelizations, lyrics for rock CDs, graphic novels, pop-up books, and writing books, such as *Writing as a Team Sport*.

About the Type

Garamond is a group of many serif typefaces, named for sixteenth-century Parisian engraver Claude Garamond, generally spelled as Garamont in his lifetime. Garamond-style typefaces are popular and particularly often used for book printing and body text.

Garamond's types followed the model of an influential typeface cut for Venetian printer Aldus Manutius by his punchcutter Francesco Griffo in 1495, and are in what is now called the old-style of serif letter design, letters with a relatively organic structure resembling handwriting with a pen, but with a slightly more structured, upright design.